Rumors

Mladen Dolar

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polity

To take rumors as a serious object of theoretical scrutiny and philosophical reflection seems like a contradiction in terms. It's true that, as Hegel says, philosophy can start anywhere – it only matters how one does it, so that there is in principle no topic that couldn't become the object of philosophical scrutiny, provided that one does it properly, at the level of the concept. But can rumors acquire the dignity of a concept? It would rather seem that there is an either–or: either one deals with rumors or one does philosophy. They appear to be mutually exclusive. What could be further away from the high mission and dignity of philosophy than paying attention to rumors, gossip, hearsay, tittle-tattle, slander, calumny, prattle, denigration? If one deals with such an unworthy and undignified subject, isn't this a sure way to ruin one's philosophical reputation? So here I am, risking my philosophical reputation – which I guess is not a bad thing at all

– to propose considering rumors as an ontological entity, as it were, a concept with far-reaching implications and ramifications that bears on the elementary nature of social bonds, the nature of language, the nature of knowledge, and ultimately the nature of our present predicament, which can be termed, as I will argue, the general rumorization of society.

To start with, here is a little story indicating the all-pervasiveness of rumors and even extending their impact to the most elementary level of being: subatomic particles and quantum physics. In 1993 the British science minister announced that he would give a bottle of champagne to the person who would best describe the Higgs field and the notorious Higgs boson (aka "the God particle"). The winning entry, by David Miller at UCL, ran like this:

> In a cocktail party, this kind of excitation might move through the crowd if a rumor spread from one end to the other. People nearest the rumor-originator would lean in to hear it. They would then pass it along to their neighbors, drawing together a new clump of people, and then return to their original positions to discuss it. The compression of

the crowd would move from one end of the room to the other, like a Higgs boson in a Higgs field.[1]

So there we have it: what is the God particle but a rumor spread at the subatomic underside of objectivity? The God particle, allegedly detaining the last secrets of the universe, turns out to have the structure of mere gossip. One can't even explain quantum physics without recourse to rumors. There is no "ontological consistency" to the rumor, if one can use such a term here, its only function is that of clumping and clustering entities that seemingly "exist" before this, but this may well be a retroactive illusion – the paradox is that actually they wouldn't exist at all without the addition of a mere rumor, they need this godly rumor to be sustained, they are not independent of their clustering by the rumor. There is a rumor going around about the God particle (physicists strongly dislike this term), but it turns out that this particle itself functions as a mere rumor. – What I have in mind is a very different kind of ontological status for rumors, although this distant analogy may prove to be strangely fitting.

Philosophy famously started with a divide, by drawing a sharp opposition between what

in Greek times was called *doxa* and what was called *epistēmē*. *Doxa* is the regime of opinions (or beliefs). Everybody is entitled to an opinion, and there is no compelling necessity that opinions be firmly grounded: they depend on private views, tastes, and preferences, but most often take their support from being widely spread and repeated. They are based on one's personal stance – I think so, I feel so, I experience it this way, I believe so – and they are ultimately tautological – I think so because I think so, and my personal opinion is my right and my freedom, indeed the much celebrated freedom of opinion. Or, concomitantly, it is so because everybody says that it is so: opinions amount to generally accepted common views but, despite their wide spread, still lack a firm foundation. They draw their authority just from being repeated. By contrast, *epistēmē* is knowledge that has to be epistemologically founded and substantiated: founded not on personal preferences, tautologies, or common assent but on "the thing itself." Knowledge aims at truth, this is the ambition that defines it, and truth should be binding and universal, not a matter of mere opinion. Knowledge has to be legitimized, it has to be based on sound argument, factual evidence,

and impartial objectivity, and all this has to be ultimately grounded in *logos*. Let's say that *logos* is the big "Other" that should vouchsafe legitimate proper knowledge. Let's say that *logos* is the classical Greek name for what Lacan, 2,500 years later, would call the big Other – in the sense of a guarantee of knowledge in its universality, in its validity, and in its binding character. *Logos* is the authority we all have to assume when aiming at knowledge and truth. The stark opposition between *doxa* and *epistēmē*, between opinion and knowledge, goes back to the Socratic foundations of philosophy, and Socrates famously spent his time dismantling people's opinions, destroying them, showing their ungrounded, arbitrary nature. All it took was asking a few awkward questions, and the regime of *doxa* would crumble. That was his favorite occupation.

Now rumors stand even lower in rank by comparison with opinions. One thing that can be said in favor of opinions is that at least people subscribe to them, they treat them as cherished possessions, they even take pride in them, they regard them as their expression, and the freedom of expression is reputedly inalienable – whereas what defines rumors is that nobody quite subscribes to them.

"I heard that . . .," "people say that . . .," "it has been suggested that . . .," "rumor has it that . . ." We should perhaps pause for a moment to mark in particular the curious structure of this common wording, "rumor has IT," which oddly suggests that rumors may indeed have to do with the Freudian It – should one suggest "rumor has *id*"? – and, inversely, that "It" may be subject to rumors.[2]

From breeze to storm

Rumors have in principle no author, they just circulate anonymously, as if by themselves, impersonally; one hears them and passes them on. There is something puzzling and ominous about this quasi-impersonal circulation: they go around like a breeze of air, stemming as if from nowhere and enveloping us, then passing on; but on the way, as it moves along, the breeze easily turns into a tempest, a whirlwind, an indomitable force, causing havoc. This metaphor actually became a running cliché about rumors, being repeated endlessly throughout history. *Fama crescit eundo*, as the Latin proverb has it: rumor grows as it goes, it increases while circulating.

But the proverb is a shorthand of its flamboyant origin in Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> Rumour,[3] compared with whom no other is as swift.
> She flourishes by speed, and gains strength as she goes:
> first limited by fear, she soon reaches into the sky,
> walks on the ground, and hides her head in the clouds.
> [. . .]
> She flies, screeching, by night through the shadows
> between earth and sky, never closing her eyelids
> in sweet sleep: by day she sits on guard on tall roof-tops
> or high towers, and scares great cities, as tenacious
> of lies and evil, as she is messenger of truth.[4]

Virgil gives a vivid, spectacular description of what may seem a rather slight and trivial phenomenon. The passage reads like a mighty crescendo, as rumor starts timidly and then rapidly reaches virtually cosmic proportions, an unstoppable and overwhelming omnipresence. The tiny creature turns into a giant, lurking from everywhere, never

at rest, although it's a mere rumor. Curiously, the context of this passage in the *Aeneid* is such that it is by rumor that Jupiter, the king of gods, eventually hears about the passionate affair between Aeneas and Dido, the queen of Carthage, and upon learning about it is spurned into immediate action to prevent it. So rumors reach even the gods; the gods are not above rumors and they need rumors to keep themselves informed. This particular rumor happens to be true, and the end of the passage implies that rumors unabashedly mix lies and truths – rumors can indeed be true, but this is the trouble, the whirlwind they cause undermines the very basis of distinction between true and false.

The expansion of rumors seems to present like an ontological puzzle, a case of *creatio* almost *ex nihilo*: a tiny speck grows into a magnificent creature by mere movement. There is no assignable origin to a rumor, one just hears it and passes it on, as a relay, yet it augments by being passed on, as if it were a natural objective force, obfuscating "our" part in its expansion. Of course, there are rumors that are intentionally invented and systematically spread, but they can function as rumors only as long as they seemingly have no ascertained source.

But if rumors have no author, it doesn't follow that they have no authority; quite the opposite. By being impersonal and anonymous, with no origin, they carry all the more an unfathomable, inscrutable, intractable authority. There is like a mysterious conversion, a transubstantiation that takes place with rumors: there is no proof, no origin, no author, no guarantee, but nevertheless they are quasi-mystically transformed into a formidable force that it is very hard, virtually impossible, to combat. Being without foundation, they nevertheless produce formidable effects; their efficiency stands in stark contrast to their lack of ground or support. "Everybody knows" that this is a mere rumor, based on thin air, but one cannot help lending it an ear and allowing it to work. Octave Mannoni, in a famous paper from 1964, proposed the notorious formula *Je sais bien, mais quand même*, "I know very well, but nevertheless,"[5] and rumors present a vintage case of this formula: "I know very well this is a mere rumor, but nevertheless . . . there may be something to it, or at least it's intriguing and entertaining, or some people may get into trouble by it, so let me participate in this for a bit, although I know very well that there is ultimately nothing to it – or is

it?" And since nobody subscribes to them ("I am not endorsing this myself, this is just a rumor I heard," hence I am exempt from responsibility; "I am saying this and I am not saying this"), they also fit another formula, elaborated by Robert Pfaller: beliefs without owners.[6] There are beliefs circulating around that nobody quite takes in (one generally imputes them to others, to the dupes), but they nevertheless produce effects. In Pfaller's reading, such beliefs are ultimately constitutive of social bonds and of culture at large.

It looks as if rumors present another face of the big Other: not the face of *logos*, knowledge, and truth but something that nobody quite believes to be true, yet it unfailingly works and is given a questionable credence and general currency. It's a matter of effectiveness and expediency rather than (or as opposed to) truth. Rumors, too, can turn out to be true, but what defines them as rumors is their indifference to the true–false criterion. There is a kind of paradoxical reversal with this kind of big Other: the more it appears fickle, unfounded, untrustworthy, unsubstantiated, the more it presents the big Other in its pure form. It is overpowering precisely because of its lack of foundation, not despite of it. It is given a space to

rule against everyone's better knowledge. It is as if we have to do here with two opposing faces of the big Other, with no common measure: on the one hand, the big Other that can (and should) provide the epistemological foundation of proper knowledge, based on *logos* and aiming at truth; on the other hand, another big Other, based on nothing but hearsay, on the wind, but nevertheless standing fast and sticking. This is the thing with rumors: they stick. Fickle as they are, they leave their mark, which seems ineffaceable. Yet, despite the stark opposition between the two, could it be that the big other is a Janus-faced creature – just like Janus, the two-faced Roman deity, the god of boundaries and transitions, with his twin faces inseparably grown together but looking in opposite directions? Shall we say "the big Other and its shadow"? "The big Other and its double"? "The big Other and its symptom"? And it appears that the shadowy other side of *logos* is as old as *logos* itself.

Fighting the shadows

The career of Socrates was suspended in an iconic and exemplary way, precisely between these

two figures of the big Other. For on the one hand his principal ambition was to dismantle all unfounded opinions and firmly point those who held them in the direction of searching for truth, the proper foundation of *logos*. But on the other hand the rumors were his undoing, the lever of his fall, the origin of his trial and ultimately his death. When Socrates was standing in front of the Athenian tribunal in 399 BCE, this is what, according to Plato, he said at the beginning of his defense:

> There have been many who have accused me to you for many years now, and none of their accusations are true. These I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends [the present and identifiable accusers] . . . Those who spread the rumors, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers . . . Moreover, these accusers are numerous, and have been at it a long time . . . What is most absurd in all this is that one cannot even know or mention their names . . . Those who maliciously and slanderously persuaded you . . . all those are most difficult to deal with: one cannot bring one of them into court or refute him; one must simply fight with shadows, as it were, in making one's defense, and cross-examine

> when no one answers. . . . Very well then. I must surely defend myself and attempt to uproot from your minds in so short a time the slander that has resided there so long.[7]

The situation is exemplary: Socrates who, more than anyone in history, fought false beliefs and promoted the way to truth based on *logos* to the point that he became the model and the beacon of this struggle, this same Socrates is powerless against the rumors that have been spreading against him for many years; they had no basis whatsoever, yet they resulted in his indictment, trial, sentence, and death. He could easily fight the visible opponents, but the ones he couldn't fight were the invisible opponents, who paved the way for the visible ones. It was like fighting shadows, but the shadows won in the end. The other face of the big Other, the face based on rumors, hearsay, and slander, got the upper hand over its glorious twin, the face based on *logos*, truth, and epistemology. It turned out that *logos* was helpless against rumors; the faceless anonymous avalanche won against the best of arguments. This is a vintage case: the other big Other was more powerful than the official and celebrated

one; rumors, trivial and unfounded as they are, have the capacity to outwit *logos*, which seems to be no match for them, and even the wisest of men (according to the Delphic oracle, which proclaimed Socrates the wisest man in Athens) had to concede defeat.

There is a Latin proverb: *Audacter calumniare, semper aliquid haeret.* "Slander boldly, something always sticks." "Spread rumors audaciously, some of it will always fasten."[8] However unfounded they are, rumors always leave a stain, and the stain is virtually impossible to erase. This easily turns into an occasion for cynical calculation: one knows that this may not be true and that there is no proof, but one also knows that it will stick, regardless of its falsity. And there is a moment of enjoyment involved in the easy power this confers: one can wield the weapon of rumors without sullying one's hands, in quasi-certainty that it will always hit the mark. There is a sort of magical thinking in the functioning of rumors, namely the belief that one can affect people (and things) with mere unfounded words; that words have the capacity to stain what they refer to, even if they are completely inaccurate and unjustified; that names can start functioning as the property of the

thing named. Whatever one ascribes to people through rumors will bring about the "spectral" quality of the latter, and no amount of argument can undo this smear. A rumor can be spread that this person is a crook, and he will inevitably be qualified as a virtual crook, regardless of his defense. One is helplessly framed by the rumor, and one is "always already" in the defensive position. The one who denigrates doesn't have to prove anything, and the one who is denigrated cannot come clean even with the best defense or justification. The burden of proof is perversely on the side of the victim, and the best of proofs will be to no avail. With rumors, the referential function works as if by some unconscious magic, affecting people and things through mere naming.

There is a long history that testifies to this indomitable power of rumors, a history of bemoaning and lamenting the utter injustice of it. One is innocent, then the rumors are spread and one is suddenly in a position of protesting one's innocence in vain; for, even if "everybody knows" that rumors are false, they have nevertheless managed to demolish and spoil one's innocence without one's doing anything wrong.

They frame their victim in such a way that the victim cannot simply step out of this frame. "Everybody knows," but also everybody secretly believes that there must be something to it. The word has the capacity not only to nominate its referent but to produce (the specter of) something that isn't there. The laments and complaints about this are countless in our cultural tradition, so let me briefly give you a few prominent examples that mark different eras; this will be like a crash course in the cultural history of the power of rumors, well, from Socrates to Trump. Leaving aside the beginnings in antiquity (and I guess the beginnings stretch back as far as mankind), I propose three stages that mark modernity.[9]

Rumors and capital

Before engaging in this account, let me make a small digression. As we have seen, there is this constant trope in the history of rumors – it has Virgil as its *locus princeps*, its starting point, but probably originates earlier – that compares rumors to a wind, a small breeze in the beginning that grows into a tempest as it goes along, through mere circulation. An analogy can be drawn with another

mighty entity that expands and multiplies seemingly by mere circulation, namely capital.[10] There, too, we encounter the expansion of something that starts modestly, then increases as if through mere circulation and is amplified into an overwhelming force, gradually engulfing everything as it goes along, in a potentially limitless process. How can such a huge thing grow from so little, through mere circulation? In the first book of *Politics*, Aristotle famously opposed *oikonomia* (household management) and *chrēmatistikē* (chrematistics, i.e. moneymaking), the former being the supposedly natural economy that sees to human needs, the legitimate economy of the household, the latter representing the money economy, trade, commerce, and so on, which all aim at gains beyond needs: the parasitic economy that pursues circulation rather than production and where money and its accumulation becomes an end in itself instead of serving the satisfaction of needs.[11] Aristotle almost literally anticipates the formulae that Marx will develop in *Capital* when he opposes the economy of commodity-money-commodity (C-M-C) – which would correspond to Aristotle's *oikonomia* – to the economy of money-commodity-money prime (M-C-M') – which provides the logic of

chrematistics and excess. Aristotle's basic problem is that money doesn't breed money – or rather money shouldn't breed money: money cannot grow through circulation alone, this is a contravention against the natural order of things, its perversion, and this prospect occasions a lot of indignation in Aristotle. But then the question arises (implicitly already in Aristotle, and then in Marx) whether there has ever been such an innocent thing as *oikonomia*, the limited economy that abides by the measure of needs alone. Maybe this is the retroactive myth of a society that uses money only for "practical purposes" and convenience, merely as a means of exchange: this money hasn't yet been perverted by a hang toward capital – the *creatio* almost *ex nihilo* through circulation. Now, by analogy, there is perhaps a similarly retroactive myth about a state or condition in which society would use language merely for information and communication, without resorting to the perversion of rumors – this creature that augments and breeds without proper foundation, through mere circulation. Rumors denature what language should by its nature be, they go around without an appropriate basis in communication and information, and, by growing, they swallow

what is supposed to be proper, natural usage. Just as rumors, in the metaphor of breeze growing into a storm, appear as a quasi-objective force, so too is the overpowering expansion of capital; the part that "our" participation plays in fueling rumors or capital gets obfuscated in both cases. Capital and rumors – I must leave this odd couple in suspense. A surplus without a coverage perniciously undermines the *logos* of language, the firm Other that should serve as a guarantee of communication and information, just as the surplus value undermines the plain economy guided by natural needs. The surplus becomes the agent, so that the alleged natural practice (of economy, of language) becomes a derivative of its surplus. What agency drives the surplus in rumors – an entity analogous to the surplus value in capital – pushing it to immeasurable proliferation? Should one recall Lacan's notion of surplus enjoyment (originally calqued on Marx's notion of surplus value), which points to a libidinal economy that subtends both? Are rumors structured like capital (rather like the fantasy of capital), or is capital structured like rumors? Do the two incommensurable logics support each other? We'll come back to this at the end.

Three Shakespearean rumors

Let's start this crash course on the modern history of rumors with Shakespeare. There are a dozen or so places where Shakespeare refers to rumors, but let me briefly take up three, quite different in nature, yet all of them suggestive and instructive. Most prominently there is a famous passage in *Hamlet.* Hamlet talks to Ophelia, after the grand scene of his soliloquy, insulting and humiliating her, and among other things he says the following: "If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, farewell" (3.1.135–9).

So no amount of chastity and purity will save her; there is no way she could protect herself against calumny and rumors, and this is the only dowry that Hamlet can think of giving her for any possible future marriage. You shall be stained if you stay in this filthy world, stained by calumnious words and rumors, and it appears that, according to his advice, the nunnery would then function as a possible safe haven against this ubiquitous stain. But the situation is utterly ambiguous and double-edged: does he want to

protect her innocence from calumnious filth, or isn't it rather that, by the very way of addressing her, he himself produces the calumny, the stain he is warning her about? The stain from which she will never recover. Isn't it rather that he, her lover, is the source of the very calumny he allegedly wants to protect her from – by implicitly treating her like a whore and sending her to a nunnery? – But how could she ever escape this fate by going to a nunnery, which functioned at the time as a euphemistic term for brothel?[12] This is a scene of separation between the two lovers, and no doubt Hamlet's jealousy, in view of her possible marriage, plays a part in his venomous speech. Virtue cannot escape calumny, but by giving her this warning as her dowry Hamlet actually undoes her virtue himself through his calumnious insinuations. It's a poisoned dowry. And one can see that this kind of treachery can take the apparent form of best intentions and moral advice, while the victim gets the blame. – The scene is violent and cruel, and in line with the figure of a Hamlet ridden by inner antagonisms that evoke the emerging antagonisms of the modern age: a disturbed man of two minds.

While Hamlet's words to Ophelia are based on an obfuscation of the fact that the subject is spreading calumny, which is subreptitiously concealed in a well-intentioned advice, here is another Shakespearean reference, one that proposes the opposite strategy of clearly exposing the intentions of the calumnious perpetrator. The second part of *Henry IV* opens with a prologue spoken by none other than Rumour personified, who comes on stage "painted full of tongues," as the stage directions indicate, clearly stating his aim.

> Open your ears; for which of you will stop
> The vent of hearing when loud Rumour speaks?
> I, from the orient to the drooping west,
> Making the wind my post-horse, still unfold
> The acts commenced on this ball of earth:
> Upon my tongues continual slanders ride,
> The which in every language I pronounce,
> Stuffing the ears of men with false reports.
> . . . Rumour is a pipe
> Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures
> And of so easy and so plain a stop
> That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,
> The still-discordant wavering multitude,

Can play upon it. . . .
The posts come tiring on,
And not a man of them brings other news
Than they have learn'd of me: from Rumour's tongues
They bring smooth comforts false, worse than true wrongs. (Prologue 1–8, 14–19, 37–40)

This is like the coming out of the rumor, which speaks in the first person – *moi, la rumeur, je parle*,[13] "I, rumor, speak." The paradox is that rumors never speak in the first person: they would cease to be rumors if one were to adopt them publicly, as one's own position of enunciation. They are always related, relayed, heard from others, and merely transmitted. The moment Rumour itself makes his[14] confession, as it were, his speech is immediately ridden with the liar's paradox: since he professes that he lies (systematically spreading "false reports"), what credence can be given to anything he says? Does he also lie about his lying? The curious thing in this prologue is that Rumour, in the middle of his speech, for a moment forgets to be the rumor and, by a strange slip (as if by a Freudian slip of the tongue that inadvertently discloses the truth), he gives a

truthful account of the events in Part One – King Harry defeating Hotspur and his troops, and so on – thus briefly summarizing what happened before, so that the audience is able to follow the sequel in Part Two. This is the function of the prologue: to provide the necessary information about the plot so far. But because this is put in the treacherous mouth of Rumour, the true account becomes doubtful. After this momentary lapse, he reconsiders and comes to his senses: "But what mean I / To speak so true at first?" (Prologue 27–8). He forgot for a moment his true nature – that is, his false nature; he should be doing his job, which is spreading false rumors, so after a moment of weakness he comes back to them and predicts that they will prevail. The appeal of false rumors is that they bring relief and pleasure, but they "bring smooth comfort false, worse than true wrongs." False comfort is worse than true wrongs: this is the punch line, and it also implies that the false comfort brought by rumors instigates and perpetuates true wrongs as its flip side and inseparable consequence. But, coming from Rumour, the self-proclaimed inveterate liar, is this true or false? Is this a clear case of the liar paradox? Of course, one can argue that

Rumour's prologue is placed at some metalevel, where the demarcation between truth and lie is clear – Rumour does tell the truth about his false nature and its pernicious consequences as well as about the actual events. But he also undermines his stance by demonstrating, by means of this impossible prosopopoeia, that there can ultimately be no metalevel, so that we are always helplessly exposed to this intertwining of truth and rumors. The prologue is both innocuous and mind-boggling.

Here is my third and final example, which introduces an entirely different perspective: that of (supposedly) "good gossip," with no need for concealment or exposure, as opposed to "bad rumors." At the happy ending of *The Comedy of Errors*, Emilia, the Abbess, says the following:

> The duke, my husband, and my children both,
> And you the calendars of their nativity,
> Go to a gossip's feast, and joy with me;
> After so long grief, such felicity!

To which the Duke responds: "With all my heart, I'll gossip at this feast" (5.1.404–8). Gossip's feast – what can this be? The celebration of the happy

outcome by sharing gossip? We have to look at the etymology of this word:

> Old English *godsibb* "baptismal sponsor, godparent," from God + sibb "relative" (see sibling). The sense was extended in Middle English to "a familiar acquaintance, a friend, neighbor, a person with whom one gossips" (c. 1300), especially to women friends invited to attend a birth, later to "anyone engaging in familiar or idle talk" (1560s). The sense was further extended 1811 to "trifling talk, groundless rumor."[15]

So gossip refers to a company of people who are not related by blood, first to godparents, by extension to social networking beyond the family ties; there is a "spiritual" community connecting them, and what else can a spiritual community devote itself to but gossip? Gossip refers to horizontal ties, beyond blood, family, and social hierarchies. It is propelled by communality, by shared background and goodwill, by the prospect of common pleasure taken in gossiping – indeed feasting on it. The use of gossip in this scene actually relates to its etymology: the Abbess has miraculously found her lost sons, believed for

so many years to be dead, and this is like their second birth.

> Thirty-three years have I but gone in travail
> Of you, my sons; and, till this present hour,
> My heavy burden ne'er delivered. (5.1.400–3)

A new birth calls for godparents – the community of gossip as an inclusive community, where everyone can function as a godparent. But what appears here as partaking in the feast of a joyful communion has the nasty tendency of sliding into the pernicious realm of malice and exclusion. Alenka Zupančič briefly commented on this aspect in her book on comedy, saying that gossip's feast laid down by Shakespeare at the dawn of modernity was inevitably heading toward the new horizon of the meaning it acquired in the era of the (post)modern big Other.

> At that time, so long in the past, did the signifiers already know the direction in which their new meaning would evolve – briefly, that, through centuries of gradual and victorious implementation of the idea of "horizontal brotherhood," the godparents' feast has increasingly and more and more

exclusively turned into the *feast of gossip/rumors/slander* that we are living today?[16]

From "gossip's feast" to Facebook, to cut it short – and couldn't gossip's feast serve as an evocative foreboding of our agonizing current predicament? Still, this third example also points in a different direction, which we will tackle later: the non-trivial yet elusive dividing line between the nasty side of rumors and the necessary side, epitomized by gossip, of establishing social bonds.

Figaro's triumph

My second example, which roughly marks the second historical moment, comes from *The Barber of Seville*, a comedy produced some 170 years after *Hamlet*, in the heyday of the Enlightenment. *The Barber of Seville* was originally a play written by Pierre Beaumarchais (*Le barbier de Séville; ou, la précaution inutile*). It was first staged in 1775 and had a huge success, indeed it was one of the most successful comedies of the eighteenth century – the paradigmatic Enlightenment comedy from the years that immediately preceded the French Revolution. But this original comedy was doubly

overshadowed: first by Beaumarchais himself, who wrote a sequel to it – the notorious *Marriage of Figaro*, first staged in 1784 – and the sequel outdid it in success and impact. This second play was one of the most explosive pieces of the time; if one is to believe reports of Napoleon's view, Figaro was already "revolution in action" and there would have been no French revolution without it (but Napoleon's famous words are actually a matter of rumor). Then, second, the original piece was overshadowed by its own operatic version: *Il barbiere di Sivigla*, composed by Gioacchino Rossini forty years later, in 1816, became one of the most successful and frequently produced operas of all times.[17] But what interests me here is just one particular scene from this opera. Briefly, Don Bartolo, a lecherous old man who wants to marry his young protégée Rosina, has a formidable adversary in Count Almaviva, who is very much in love with her and pursuing her; so in this scene Don Bartolo seeks advice from his friend Don Basilio as to the best means of averting his rival. And Don Basilio has but one advice to give: calumny. Calumny can destroy anyone, and in a famous aria – one of the most celebrated bass buffo arias in the classical

repertoire – he sings great praise to the formidable force of calumny. (I cannot refrain from quoting also the brilliant Italian original.)[18]

Calumny is a little breeze,	*La calunnia è un venticello*
a gentle zephyr,	*un'auretta assai gentile*
which insensibly, subtly,	*che insensibile sottile*
lightly and sweetly,	*leggermente dolcemente*
commences to whisper.	*incomincia a sussurrar.*
Softly softly, here and there,	*Piano piano terra terra,*
sottovoce, sibilant,	*sotto voce, sibilando*
it goes gliding, it goes rambling.	*va scorrendo, va ronzando;*
Into the ears of the people,	*nelle orecchie della gente*
it penetrates slyly	*s'introduce destramente,*
and the head and the brains	*e le teste ed i cervelli*
it stuns and it swells.	*fa stordire e fa gonfiar.*
From the mouth re-emerging	*Dalla bocca fuori uscendo*
the noise grows crescendo,	*lo schiamazzo va crescendo:*
gathers force little by little,	*prende forza a poco a poco,*
runs its course from place to place,	*scorre già di loco in loco,*
seems the thunder of the tempest	*sembra il tuono, la tempesta*
which from the depths of the forest	*che nel sen della foresta*
comes whistling, muttering,	*va fischiando, brontolando,*
freezing everyone in horror.	*e ti fa d'orror gelar.*
Finally with crack and crash,	*Alla fin trabocca, e scoppia,*
it spreads afield, its force redoubled,	*si propaga si raddoppia*

and produces an explosion	*e produce un'esplosione*
like the outburst of a cannon,	*come un colpo di cannone,*
an earthquake, a whirlwind,	*un tremuoto, un temporale*
a general uproar,	*un tumulto generale*
which makes the air resound.	*che fa l'aria rimbombar.*
And the poor slandered wretch,	*E il meschino calunniato*
vilified, trampled down,	*avvilito, calpestato*
sunk beneath the public lash,	*sotto il pubblico flagello*
by good fortune, falls to death.	*per gran sorte va a crepar.*

If calumny ever had an anthem, a eulogy, a panegyric, a song of praise, then this is the one. It is a very funny aria and a great showpiece. It starts with a gentle piano, then develops in a snowballing crescendo toward an overwhelming fortissimo – the climax (*come colpa di canone,* like the outburst of a canon) – and ends gently, cheerfully, and maliciously, enjoying the inevitable downfall of the poor victim, her or his "death" – because calumny can indeed kill. The musical directions (*pianissimo, piano piano, rinforzando, crescendo,* chorus) are already present in Beaumarchais's original prose text, which looks as if it were just waiting to be put to music.[19]

But this is the age of the Enlightenment at its glorious height and the revolution is just

around the corner, so the setting is very different from that of *Hamlet*; given the optimism of the age, calumny and rumors are powerless for once. The great irony of Rossini's opera is that, after extolling so persuasively the gigantic powers of calumny, it makes them fail miserably in the end. True love wins and the pernicious and malicious stratagems of the depraved *ancien régime* are defeated – largely thanks to the skills and intrigues of the shrewd servant Figaro, a self-made man for the new age. Where Socrates failed, there Figaro succeeded. Socrates couldn't fight the slanderous shadows, but Figaro can. The servant can defeat the master, shrewdness and cleverness can defeat rank. The message is: calumny and rumors can be outwitted, and no doubt one can detect there the ultimate faith in the triumphant powers of reason (the cunning of reason?), which are a match even for the invincible forces of calumny and gossip (associated with the forces of the *ancien régime*). The first big Other wins over the other one; reason wins over its shady double – and this could even serve as a makeshift definition of the Enlightenment's ambitions. Reason will prevail even against such an indomitable adversary as rumors.

Rousseau and the birth of conspiracy theories

Yet there was a dark flip side in the Enlightenment itself that cast doubt on the faith in the prevailing reason. If there is an author in the enlightened age who took rumors and calumny as both a social matter and his greatest intimate problem, then this is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As his career progressed – he soon became a celebrity, being widely known in France and across Europe – he saw himself increasingly as an outcast, unjustly excluded and persecuted, ruined by the invincible powers of rumors and calumny, which amounted to conspiracy. One can immediately see here the great difference between rumors and conspiracy theories: with rumors, nobody needs to believe them, one just passes them on and they work regardless of whether people subscribe to them or not, the delegated belief is enough, whereas conspiracy theories are marked by stark conviction and the believer is profoundly persuaded by its truth – namely that these are no mere rumors, they must be orchestrated, systematically organized and spread by a mastermind pulling the strings. There is a plot behind them, a plot of world proportions, with virtually everybody

taking part in it, so that the poor persecuted wretch must try to prove her or his goodwill and innocence against enormous odds. And we have seen that, once one is framed by rumors, one is always in a hopelessly defensive position, that is, quasi-doomed to defend oneself in vain.

Rousseau, seeing himself as the victim of such a plot, wrote a number of autobiographical accounts to justify his position, regarding on the one hand his public figure and published works and, on the other, his private demeanor, which was under harsh attack from the campaign of defamation that threatened to stifle him. He thus wrote the *Confessions* (1766–70), in a completely honest attempt to invite public scrutiny of himself down to the most embarrassing detail – speaking with painful frankness, relying on the big Other of public opinion to appreciate his honesty and innocence, and counting on its enlightened commonsense, reason, and empathy. All this was to no avail. After a few readings in his own circle of friends, the *Confessions* were met with silence and embarrassment; it seemed that he was shunned even by the people he trusted most – but at that stage he didn't really trust anyone any more. The *Confessions* were an appeal

to the big Other, but the big Other turned a deaf ear – the big other of reason was already so imbued with the big Other of calumny that one couldn't tell them apart. There came a further attempt at self-justification, a more ingenious one: *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques* (1772–6). This work is construed as a series of dialogues between two characters: "Rousseau," the double of Rousseau the author – an impartial, educated man who has read all of Rousseau's works and appreciates them without knowing their author; and an anonymous Frenchman, a representative of the public opinion who never bothered to read any of Rousseau's works, since he followed the widely spread opinion that their author, Jean-Jacques – J.J. (as Rousseau refers to him) – is a monster and a scoundrel. He knows J.J. only by hearsay, by his disastrous reputation, which was confirmed by important persons of good name, both in the state and in intellectual life. But "Rousseau" insists on forming an independent opinion, without regard for "what people say," and eventually goes to great lengths to meet J.J. himself and bear witness to his innocence. This dialogue is thus not a confession (in fact it may well qualify for a title like "Anti-Confessions," as

Foucault suggested in the Preface he wrote for it in 1962).[20] It rather stages a court of law where the barrister for the prosecution and the barrister for the defense confront each other in front of the public, aiming to issue judgment on the nature of the absent J.J.[21] The situation resembles somewhat that of Socrates's *Apology*,[22] where the accused philosopher has to present his case in court against an overwhelming avalanche of denigration, and in both cases the charge relates to the undermining of moral and political standards in the city. Unlike Socrates, Rousseau had to establish the imagined court himself, since there was no real court to put his case to. He had to make the others enact it on a stage, without letting J.J. speak for himself.

The outcome of the three dialogues is such that the Frenchman, the representative of the vilifying opinion, is eventually swayed to read Rousseau's books and is persuaded by their author's acumen and best intentions. The two interlocutors agree in the end, the mini-court reaches its verdict and, after a long deliberation, finds the defendant not guilty – but what follows from there? Will they take action to exonerate the poor victim in the eyes of the public? Not at all. The Frenchman

is now completely convinced of J.J.'s innocence, but, he says,

> I have a status, friends to preserve, a family to support, patrons to satisfy. I don't want to play Don Quixote in this and fight the powers in order to be the center of attention for a moment and be lost for the rest of my life. If I can make amends for my wrongs toward the unfortunate J.J. and be of use to him without exposing myself, well and good. I will do so with all my heart. But if you expect me to take some flamboyant step that compromises me and exposes me to the blame of my peers, you are quite mistaken. I will never go to that point.[23]

And "Rousseau," his interlocutor, doesn't push him or blame him; he is himself reluctant to act publicly. It appears that public opinion is so permeated with nasty rumors that honest people must fear for their own reputation and safety. There is an overwhelming conspiracy going on.

What can Rousseau, the author, do with his apology in such a situation? Who would be an impartial reader and judge, the one who listens to reason? Since no one could be trusted,

he decided to entrust himself to divine providence and deposit the text on the altar of Notre Dame, a most prominent place, at the heart of Paris. Only divine authority can be a match for the formidable power of rumors. In the incredible postscript entitled "History of the Preceding Writing," we learn that on Saturday, February 24, 1776 – shortly after the successful première of Beaumarchais' *Barber* and, not least, in the year of the American Revolution – Rousseau entered Notre Dame with the intention of depositing his text on the altar, with this inscription:

> Protector of the oppressed, God of justice and truth, receive this deposit placed on your Altar and entrusted to your providence by an unfortunate stranger, alone, without support, without a defender on earth, insulted, mocked, defamed, betrayed by a whole generation, burdened for more than fifteen years at whim by treatment worse than death and by indignities unheard of until now among men, without ever having been able at least to learn the cause.[24]

But, although he carefully studied and chose the best moment to make this deposit, he

nevertheless found the passage blocked by a fence that had never been there before.

> All the more struck by this unforeseen obstacle because I hadn't told anyone of my project, I believed in my initial transport that I was seeing Heaven itself collaborate in the iniquitous work of men, and the murmur of indignation that escaped me can only be conceived by a person who can put himself in my place, or excused by one who can read what is at the bottom of hearts.[25]

The immediate conclusion that follows from this is that God himself must be part of the conspiracy; it's not just nasty men and corrupt institutions. The conspiracy is of cosmic proportions – God himself, the protector of truth and justice, is complicit with the flood of rumors. Divine providence, on which he was counting, prevented Rousseau from appealing directly to God. He left the church rapidly and resolved never to come back during his life.

Yet he didn't give up hope. He then decided to make his appeal not to God, but to the tribunal of ordinary people, who hopefully still possessed a sense of honesty and truthfulness; so he wrote,

in many copies, a circular letter that briefly summarized his case, then distributed the copies to random people in the street, but nobody would pay attention. He lost all hope of seeing reason and truth prevail during his lifetime, but he put his hopes in the future; people will read his works after his death, and just one proper reader would be enough to dispel all this conspiratorial darkness:

> But if among those who have read me there were a single human heart or even one truly sensible mind, my persecutors would have labored in vain and soon the truth would shine through to the eyes of the public.[26]

So there is a big Other of *logos* and truth, and it will prevail, but not in this life, not in this era, which treacherously calls itself Enlightenment when in fact it is entirely dominated by the shadowy Other of rumors and denigration. – The *Dialogues*, by the way, was published in 1782, four years after Rousseau's death, and was always looked upon with some unease, as a bizarre addition to his oeuvre, casting on it suspicions of his madness. (Tellingly, the first English

translation dates from 1989: it took more than two centuries.)

Who were the perpetrators, the masterminds behind this huge conspiracy of which Rousseau was the tormented victim? There is a constant reference to "gentlemen," *Messieurs* (mentioned actually no less than 146 times in the text), and the designation aims first of all at the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the circle around the *Encyclopédie* headed by Diderot and closely followed by Grimm,[27] d'Alembert, Voltaire, d'Holbach, Mme d'Épinay, and others. Sometimes they are named, but most often referred to with the generic "gentlemen." Let me give just one picturesque example:

> If d'Alembert or Diderot took it upon themselves today to affirm that he [Jean-Jacques] has two heads, everyone who saw him pass in the street tomorrow would see his two heads very distinctly, and everyone would be very surprised that they hadn't perceived this monstrosity sooner.[28]

So here is the first paradoxical implication: it is precisely the enlightened philosophers, the fighters on the forefront of reason, who were the

main instigators of rumors and calumny. And, second, the conspiracy was equally carried out by state authorities, the government, the police, various institutions, the church – precisely the cornerstones of the *ancien régime*, so that the philosophers and the establishment actually worked in complicity, supporting each other beyond the deceptive appearance of conflicts. He saw it as a joint conspiracy of the Enlightenment and the *ancien régime*. It is because of this connivance and collusion that reason cannot prevail – and even God seems to be on their side. The outcast Rousseau is the only one who can see light, the last lonely and abandoned support of the proper big Other.

Now here is another paradox: one has to say that the image of the persecuted sufferer was far from being imaginary. After the huge popular success of Rousseau's novel *The New Heloise*, his two subsequent works, *The Social Contract* and particularly *Émile, or On Education*, both published in 1762, were banned, harshly condemned by religious authorities, burned in Paris and Geneva. There was a warrant for his arrest and he had to flee the country, first to Switzerland, then to England in 1766 (at the invitation of David

Hume, which was followed by a bitter falling out of the two). Upon return he had to live under an assumed name and was indeed – literally – persecuted for years. As for the philosophers, Voltaire never disguised his utter hostility to Rousseau, not shying away even from denouncing his private life and personality. Rousseau had a harsh dispute with Diderot, a falling out with his initial protectress, Mme d'Épinay, and other episodes of the same ilk, so that his experience as an outcast had a very real basis. Also, the Enlightenment philosophers' numerous connections with sovereigns were no figment of the imagination (think of Condorcet's or Voltaire's correspondence with Frederick the Great). One may surmise that the position of outcast was to a large extent self-imposed: he presented himself from the outset as a stranger and an outsider and was proud of it; even more, he was surreptitiously enjoying his victimhood.

Is the conspiracy theory, then, all in his mind, or is it real? Well, there is a thin line separating his real enemies from the conspiracy plot that suddenly filled his mental space. One of Lacan's famous quips goes like this: even if your wife is cheating on you, this doesn't change the fact that

your jealousy is a pathological state. It seems that this fits Rousseau's case perfectly. He was indeed persecuted and excluded, although he had a host of admirers and devoted fans at the same time (he was actually one of the first true celebrities).[29] But do the facts of his exclusion and persecution vouch for his flamboyant conspiracy theory? One can say that the conspiracy theories are always wrong, even if they agree with a number of facts: they are wrong precisely by imputing a master plan, a mastermind that pulls the strings, an all-pervasive system, a deliberate plot, an organized scheme, a premeditated strategy (and one of cosmic extent) – all of this well hidden and beyond reach, invisible, unprovable, hence all the more adamantly believed in, a matter of inflexible and unshakeable conviction. The shadowy other becomes the real big Other of the plot, and the Enlightenment itself begins to look like the plot designed to stifle reason.

Was Rousseau a psychotic, then? This is the common supposition recurring in all literature, where his mental state is presented as sliding into paranoia and madness. Yet, if his conspiracy theory is patently misguided, it has nevertheless the value of a symptom. What we witness here

is like the birth of conspiracy theories out of the spirit of the Enlightenment; the faith in reason as the power that can dissipate all rumors and the shadowy big Other is redoubled with an adamant belief in an unassailable big Other, secretly devised by reason itself, which reason cannot overpower. Rousseau is the flip side of Figaro.

The trials of Josef K.

My next example brings us to modern times. If we open Kafka's *Trial* on page one and read the first sentence, this is what it says: "Someone must have been spreading rumors about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested."[30] *Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben* . . . For *verleumden*, the dictionary gives "to slander, to calumniate, to vilify, to defame, to denigrate, to malign, to backbite." This is one of the most famous opening sentences in the whole of world literature. Where do we start? In the beginning was – not the Word, *logos*, as in the Bible, not the act, as in *Faust* – in the beginning was a rumor. Here we have, in paradigmatic form, the two versions of the big Other: in the beginning was *logos* versus in the beginning

was a rumor – which, to be sure, is also a word, but emphatically not the Word, *logos*; anything but. Two kinds of word face each other: in the beginning was a word, but which word? Was it *logos* or rumor? – One could propose a "dialectical synthesis" of the two: "Rumor has it that in the beginning was the Word." Actually, if we look closer at this sentence, it already has this kind of structure itself. "Someone must have been spreading rumors about Josef K." – the sentence doesn't claim that rumors were actually spread, only that they must have been; rumors are subject to inference, conjecture, surmise, hypothesis. Rumors are subject to rumors. One could propose the paraphrase: "Rumor has it that someone has been spreading rumors . . ." There is like a meta-rumor involved. The sentence, simple as it appears, turns out to have many layers.

Rumors, by definition, have no author, so there is an unspecified "someone," *jemand*, who can never be brought to light and identified. It all starts with a word coming from nowhere, yet being overpowering. One could say that the situation of Josef K. is (again) somewhat analogous to that of Socrates: Socrates, too, was the victim of rumors that had been spreading anonymously

for a long time and eventually resulted in the arrest, the charge, and the trial. But with Socrates at least we know what the rumors were, or at least what the accusations against him were – corruption of the youth, disregard for the gods of the city, and so on. The peculiar thing with Josef K. is that we never learn what the allegations were or what he was charged with, indeed he was never even charged, and there was actually no trial (apart from one curious interrogation; the title is a spectacular misnomer). Josef K. never had an opportunity to present his apology before the court, like Socrates, or to refute the charges. But their separate fates come together in the end, at the point of execution, as Socrates drinks the hemlock and Josef K. is slaughtered with a knife, "like a dog." They were both killed in the end on the basis of something that started as a mere rumor.[31] Slender cause, massive effects (can we propose "slender/slanderous cause"?). There is a stark discrepancy between cause and effect.

Josef K., a bank clerk, had, by the way, a predecessor in Gregor Samsa, the commercial traveler who famously woke up transformed into a huge insect. This is what Gregor Samsa says at some point in his defense:

> And you know very well that the traveler, who is never seen in the office almost the whole year around, can so easily fall a victim to gossip and ill luck and unfounded complaints, which he mostly knows nothing about.[32]

The Metamorphosis, written two years before *The Trial*, already contains the germ of gossip that would burgeon in the novel and take enormous proportions. As a perspicacious reader put it, "[t]he whole of *The Trial* is encapsulated in these words."[33]

With Kafka we have the darkest version of rumors: they stand at the origin, they stand for the absent origin, they don't need to be specified, spelled out, substantiated in any way, yet they are taken up by authorities. This is just a rumor in its purest form, and all that one can say about it is that it was in some way directed against Josef K. It is a rumor without content and without substance, rumor per se, *schlechthin*, rumor *sans phrase*. This is the other face of the big Other in a pure form: it doesn't need any content to work, it just provides an instigating moment, setting off a process (indeed *der Prozess*) that is unstoppable. What was a mere slander, a very slender slander,

is magnified by the law, by the court, becoming a whirlwind against which there is no possible defense. How could one defend oneself if there is no charge? If in this way the shadowy side of the big Other is overwhelming, then it looks as if its first side, that of *logos*, has gone into hiding. The court, the institution supposed to be based on the law and, ultimately, on *logos* – the harbinger of *logos* in chaotic situations of social turmoil, the impartial big Other expected to resolve disputes and dispense justice – is completely taken hostage by the other side of *logos* and becomes hostage to rumors. The court is a receding entity, massively omnipresent but nowhere to be seen, just like the castle: both the court and the castle are subject to rumors, emphatically so, but no less real for that reason. The two sides of the big Other have been amalgamated not through some compromise or middle ground, but through a process of one swallowing the other. The *logos* part has become the extension of its shadow – the shadow that overshadows its alleged origin.

The rumor, the calumny, *die Verleumdung* ("defamation"), which initiated it all, is mentioned only once, in the first sentence. The novel never comes back to this, the supposed origin

of the trial, and there are no clues as to who the "someone" (*jemand*) might have been (*jemand* is the first word in the novel). Moreover, there is something curious about this famous first sentence: the whole novel is written from the perspective of Josef K., we see things only through his eyes – except for the first sentence.[34] The supposition that someone was spreading rumors is not presented as K.'s own; the sentence implies that it was made by an objective narrator. This narrator also affirms that Josef K. has done no wrong – or does s/he? If we look at the German sentence and its subjunctive mode, the sentence doesn't even claim this much: *ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte*,[35] "without his having done anything wrong," actually more accurately rendered "presumably without his having done anything wrong." K.'s innocence is subject to rumors as well – not only his guilt. On closer inspection, the first sentence doesn't claim that rumors were actually spread or that K. is actually innocent. The only thing that is certain is that he was apprehended. – In any case, the objective narrator is there only to throw the first stone, and then he disappears.[36] From here on we see things only through Josef K.'s perspective. K. cannot adopt

the bird's-eye view, this is the privilege of the vanishing narrator.

If we were to make a guess as to who it may be that had spread rumors about K., then perhaps the most interesting hypothesis is that such a person could be none other than K. himself. Thus denigration would ultimately be self-denigration, imputed to the initial narratorial voice. This interpretation was proposed by Giorgio Agamben in an article titled "K.,"[37] where he points out that the letter K may well stand for Latin *kalumnia* ("calumny"), which was spelled with *k* in the oldest Latin inscriptions. Agamben reminds us that the false accusation was an abominable crime in Roman law and the perpetrators were branded with the letter K on their forehead.[38] (Given that Kafka, himself a lawyer, was very knowledgeable about Roman law, it's unlikely that the choice of K is a coincidence.) Thus Josef K. himself could well figure as the great calumniator, branded with K for bringing a false accusation against himself. The paradox, if we follow this argument, is that the self-denigration functions as an alien external force from which there is no escape; what makes the external force fateful is ultimately K.'s own complicity with the law. – We are at one

further remove from Hamlet: Hamlet's warnings about calumny, made under the guise of protection for Ophelia, ultimately hit her, whereas Josef K. may well be, if unwittingly, the originator of a calumny that hit nobody but him and brought about his end. In matters of calumny, the modern age has made some progress since Hamlet.

The canine theory of language

The vast majority of references to rumors fall into the category of laments about their crushing power against which reason, proofs, and argument are helpless – to the point that this lament turns into a recurring cliché. But let's now consider an example which takes things from a very different angle. It stems from Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares, Exemplary Stories*, published in 1613, eight years after the first part of *Don Quixote* and its huge success. The particular story I have in mind, the fourth in the series, is called "El casamiento engañoso" ("The Deceitful Wedding") and acts as a frame to another, very famous story: "The Dialogue of the Dogs," the fifth of the twelve *novellas* and one of the showcases of Spanish classical literature. Toward the end of the fourth

story, its protagonist finds himself in hospital, delirious with fever, and during the night overhears two old dogs having a conversation. His memory is very good because he ate a lot of raisins and almonds, Cervantes tells us, so he writes everything down in the morning, word for word. The fifth story is his account of that conversation, as read by a student.

The two dogs, Scipio and Berganza, want to tell each other their lifestories as they lie idly and sleepless on a mat, in the middle of the night. But these are not like other animals in fables, who can just talk without further ado; they are both aware that the gift of speech they have been given is very special. So throughout the dialogue they keep reflecting on the nature of speech, its function and its peculiarities, its mysterious powers and pitfalls. As Berganza recounts the adventures of his canine life and his troubles with past masters, he cannot quite refrain from engaging in slander, gossip, and denigration, so he is constantly admonished and rebuked by Scipio, who advises him to exercise care with this propensity of language – an inherent tendency, seemingly hard to avoid. Then Berganza responds as follows:

> To be sure, Scipio, one has to be very wise and very circumspect if one wants to sustain two hours' conversation without one's words bordering on gossip. For I find in myself, although I'm an animal, that I've only to open my mouth a few times before the words come rushing to my tongue like flies to wine, and all of them malicious and slanderous. And so I repeat what I've said before: that we inherit our evil words and deeds from our earliest ancestors and we ingest them with our mothers' milk. This is clearly seen in the way a child has barely got his arm out of his swaddling clothes when he raises his fist as if to avenge himself on the person he thinks has offended him. And almost the first word he articulates is to call his nurse or mother a whore.[39]

This is the most remarkable account of the origin of language that I know of. What else could be the most natural first word for an innocent infant to utter? A whore – even before *fort da*? Before, or rather as an alternative to, "mummy"? The flip side of mummy?

To follow this suggestion, gossip (rumor, slander, etc.) is not some occasional deplorable deviation from what speech usually is and should properly be, but rather pertains to the basic

function of speech and sneaks in from its very inception. No speech without gossip, from the moment one opens one's mouth. Gossip usurps the origin of language, but there is no language without this usurpation. There is no function of referring, of neutral description, objective account, without gossip immediately creeping in. If we extrapolate from this idea, we arrive at the opposite of what is usually taken for granted: the common functions of speech, say, communication and sharing information, are already premised on its basic propensity for slander and insult. To speak is to speak maliciously, to speak is to gossip and spread rumors, to speak is to denigrate. Indeed, where would we be if we were only to proffer reliable information and make sound statements? We wouldn't last a minute if we were confined to sentences like "The cat is on the mat," which analytical philosophy is so fond of. Actually, we might well cease to be human. (Should one, in brackets, propose the opposition between the cat theory of language and the dog theory of language?)

From the perspective we are following, suggested by the two dogs, communication and information are ultimately but an attempt at

taming, domesticating, and downplaying what speech originally is, a cover-up for speech in its minimal form: gossip. We don't need language primarily to impart information; we need language to gossip and slander, the one thing that animals can't do. Roman Jakobson famously proposed six basic functions of language,[40] but one can't find the function of gossip on the list. I guess the linguists are too polite and too idealistic; they believe in communication and collaboration. Cervantes's dogs have a more realistic, or rather more cynical view of things (etymologically, "cynicism" derives from the ancient Greek noun for "dog," *kuōn*) and are, if I may say so, closer to a materialist standpoint. On one view of language, people basically like each other and want to communicate, cooperate, exchange useful information; here communication is the name of the game. On another view of language, advocated by the two dogs, people basically hate each other, use language as a weapon, and can hardly wait to gossip and slander, to throw insults, to hurt and offend. So which one should we follow, Jakobson or Berganza?

The dog suggests that evil words and deeds, malice, and slander come naturally; we ingest

them with our mother's milk, they stem from our "earliest ancestors," *primeros padres*. No doubt what lurks at the bottom is the idea of original sin – the sin committed by Adam and Eve, whose progeny we are: we are all heirs to the fall, hence our propensity to slander. In the old Slovene translation there is an incredible footnote here where Cervantes's translator kindly points out that dogs, as animals, after all do not stem from Adam and Eve and are thus not subject to the fall.[41] From this we can extrapolate a basic thesis: the gift of language, which they so heatedly debate, is what constitutes the fall. Language and the fall coincide. Language is our original sin, hence its natural and spontaneous propensity to gossip and calumny. Since it coincides with original sin, it's not surprising that its basic function is to spread unfounded malicious rumors, and that one cannot speak for any length of time without this "zero function" coming to the surface, sneaking in, however much one tries to keep it at bay. No neutral communication, no neutral information, no language without gossip – ever since the fall; but the fall is language itself.

No language without gossip, but nowhere is this true more than in Slovenia (if you excuse

me this parochial digression). Slovenian presents this peculiarity that, in it, the word for "rumors," *govorica* (most often used in plural, *govorice*), is the same as the word for "language." So there is this speculative unity (but only in Slovenian?) of the two sides: one word for both language and rumor.[42] In Slovenian the gift of speech coincides with the gift of rumors, to the point that one cannot tell them apart. Other languages need metaphors (like voice, shouting, calling, hearing), whereas in Slovenian language itself is the metaphor for rumors – or is it the other way round?

One should be careful to distinguish between insults and gossip, which are amalgamated in the canine theory quoted earlier (see p. 54). Insults are launched at interlocutors, at the addressees of speech, as in the example of the infant who calls her or his nurse or mother a whore. But gossip essentially concerns people who are absent: one cannot gossip about one's interlocutors in their presence. Gossip is based on there being a community of speakers; it happens at the expense of those who are absent and can therefore be talked about. Gossip is like insult at one remove: an insult that has disentangled itself from the immediacy of speech situations and is relegated

to the role of reference to the absent. Gossipers form a community based on exclusion; and the reference to third parties that are conveniently absent provides safety, protection from exposure, and the glue that ties together the gossiping community. This helps replenish the libidinal charge that subtends language, where the amiable ties of the in-group are reinforced by aggression and malice toward the excluded (at least potentially and structurally). Perhaps the humanizing act is the transition of speech from insult to gossip; for it is only in gossip that language acquires the function of founding a community of speakers through the exclusion of some. Insults can still be taken as an extension of the hostilities that animals launch at each other, but gossip appears like a specifically human function.

Looking back at what I have been proposing all along, the two sides of the big Other, its official and its shadowy side, the *logos* side and the rumors side, we can see that, according to the canine theory of language, the shadow comes first, preceding the thing it is supposed to be the shadow of – or at least sneaking in immediately, as a co-original. There is no big Other that wouldn't be contaminated by its shadow from the

outset, so much so that the official Other comes too late, trying but never quite managing to cover up the shadow that preceded it or coincided with it. It tries to present it as a mere shadow in the first place, a deviation of *logos*, its unfortunate straying away, a contingent nuisance. It tries to protest its own innocence, putting all the blame on its malicious counterpart. The two dogs themselves propose, in passing, a theory of philosophy as agent of *logos* and of its relation to rumors. Says Scipio, in warning, to Berganza:

> Be careful, Berganza, that this urge to philosophize which you say has come over you, is not a temptation of the devil, for gossip has no subtler veil to soften and conceal its dissolute wickedness than for the gossip-monger to claim that every word he utters contains the wisdom of a philosopher, that speaking ill of people is justifiable reproof, and exposing the defects of our fellows is a worthy and conscientious act.[43]

On this account, philosophy is a higher kind of gossip, gossip in disguise, pretending to be morally elevated and well founded. The temptation of the devil (who in the first place lured Adam and

Eve out of the Garden of Eden) is not merely to give in to gossip and its enticements; there is an even greater temptation, the philosophical temptation, namely to present gossip as philosophical wisdom, as *logos* itself, which has deceptively cut its umbilical cord with its gossipy origin and can reign free in its seeming universality of ideas. The devil's temptation is to rationalize and legitimize rumors, to purify them and present them as philosophy rather than discard them as unworthy. Thus philosophy would be the devil's subtlest veil. The problem with *logos* is its unavowed and disavowed enjoyment of gossip and rumors, its complicity in them, its incapacity to cut itself loose from them. One could say that *logos* is ultimately the gentrification of rumors. Consequently the two sides of the big Other, which seem to be in stark opposition and to have no common measure, are actually secretly bound together and tacitly support each other. – To make an abrupt aside and go into Lacanian theory: shouldn't one be reminded here of Lacan's dictum "there is no Other of the Other"? And, given the amount of enjoyment that gossip offers and by which it is driven, couldn't one say that we have here an inherent link between two Lacanian sayings: *ça*

parle (it speaks) and *ça jouit et ça ne veut rien savoir* (it enjoys and doesn't want to know)? Isn't gossip precisely the mediator of the two? The "it" of "rumor has it"?

There is an incredible psychoanalytic postscript to this story. One of the earliest documents we have about Freud's development as a young adult is the correspondence he carried with his friend Eduard Silberstein. Silberstein was Freud's classmate in secondary school (gymnasium) and a fellow undergraduate later on, at university. Their correspondence started in 1871, when Freud was fifteen, and spanned ten years, until 1881.[44] This was a very close friendship and the exchange was intense, prefiguring Freud's later correspondence and close friendship with Wilhelm Fließ. The two boys were already being taught English, French, Latin, and Greek at school and decided to learn Spanish by themselves, from a primer. They established an Academia Española with just two members (but with a seal and an official statute),[45] and decided to conduct a correspondence in Spanish, for practice. Theirs was a clumsy Spanish with many mistakes, but they improved as they went along. The textbook they used contained – what else but – a selection from "The

Dialogue of the Dogs," so they agreed to take on a dog role each and started to sign their letters as Scipio (Freud) and Berganza (Silberstein). These are letters of youth that discuss everyday matters, girls and first loves (Freud's falling in love with a Gisela Fluss, for instance), and they duly contain a fair amount of gossip, in the spirit of Cervantes's story. The correspondence gradually moved to serious topics in philosophy during their student years, and we find there a testimonial of Freud's first engagement with philosophy. In a famous letter he recounts his meeting with Franz Brentano, whose lectures he attended and who was a major formative influence. So we get here a glimpse into pre-psychoanalytic Freud, into his early development – and, could one say, into the birth of psychoanalysis out of the spirit of the two dogs? Into the birth of psychoanalysis out of the spirit of gossip? Into the inseparability of the linguistic Other (in this case literally materialized, as Spanish grammar and vocabulary) from its gossipy double? Into the slide from mere gossip to philosophy, as the higher kind of gossip? The two dogs of Cervantes can be considered the genuine godfathers of psychoanalysis (one should recall that the etymon of "gossip"

is *god-sib*, "godparents"): godfathers before its birth, and one can hardly imagine better sponsors.

How did psychoanalysis start? Here is a suggestion: it started with Freud impersonating the dog (stepping in the dog's shoes?) – Cervantes's dog Scipio, the one who, in the story, suggests that philosophy may be just a disavowal of gossip, thus turning its primary gossipy nature into reproof and moral elevation and reminding philosophy of its (supposed) libidinal source and, more broadly, of the impossibility to disentangle the libidinal charge of gossip from the origin of the universality of language. What is ultimately at stake here, directly pointing to the core of psychoanalysis, is the status of the big Other – gossip functioning as the symptom of what would later be called, in more technical terms, the lack of, or in, the Other. It points to the necessary (and at the same time necessarily shaky) nature of the big Other.

There is an even more unbelievable postscript to this postscript. Later in life the two friends lost contact. Silberstein was a Romanian Jew and, after finishing his studies, he moved back to Romania. He got married and, when his young

wife Pauline developed a mental illness, he grew concerned and eventually decided to send her to Vienna to see Dr. Freud, who by then had established his practice and had earned a reputation as a therapist. This was a desperate call for help to his close friend from youth, ten years after the end of their correspondence. The young woman got an appointment to see Freud, whose office was on the third floor (this was before the move to the famous address at Berggasse 19). So, in May 1891, walking up to Freud's office, Pauline threw herself from a window and killed herself before ever seeing him. – This was the terrible, gruesome ending to this story, which had such a hilarious beginning with two boys gossiping in broken Spanish.

Rumors and immortality

We have considered so far testimonies on rumor in the western tradition, stretching back to ancient Greece and Rome, then we moved on to modern classics and selected a few texts from English, French, Italian, Spanish, and German literature. The next stop is the East: here is a passage from Russian literature. Nikolai Gogol's magnificent

novel *Dead Souls* (1842) – a proto-Kafkaesque piece, as it were – deserves to be ranked among the best. The plot doesn't need to concern us here. Very briefly, Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, the protagonist – one can't call him a hero, as there are no heroes in this universe – gains great popularity in a provincial town with his bizarre business of trading in dead souls, but at a certain point his reputation is ruined by rumors and he is forced to flee the city. Here is the passage that interests us:

> [B]ut mortal man – truly, it is hard to understand how your mortal man is made: however banal the news may be, as long as it is news, he will not fail to pass it on to some other mortal, even if it is precisely with the purpose of saying: "See what a lie they're spreading!" and the other mortal will gladly incline his ear, though afterwards he himself will say: "Yes, that is a perfectly banal lie, not worthy of any attention!" and thereupon he will set out at once to look for a third mortal, so that, having told him, they can both exclaim with noble indignation: "What a banal lie!" And it will not fail to make the rounds of the whole town, and all mortals, however many there are, will have their fill of

> talking and will then admit that it is unworthy of attention and not worth talking about.[46]

The astounding thing in this passage is of course the offhand use of "mortal man," which in one stroke, albeit implicitly, brings the question of spreading rumors into direct connection with nothing less than our mortality, thus opening up a whole speculative perspective. Do we trade in rumors in order to counteract our mortality? Are rumors our incipient tie to what is "beyond mortal"? It's not just the celebrated noble endeavors of the spirit that (supposedly) open this perspective; it may have a more trivial base in our propensity for rumors. A mortal, pushed by her/his mortality, makes haste to convey the rumor to another mortal, in the hope that this would assuage or counteract her/his mortality – perhaps by partaking in something that exceeds it? At the same time the passage points not to the "objective" informational value of rumors (which may be zero or a trifle), but to the production, transmission, and distribution of jouissance that ultimately provides the glue for our social ties – jouissance that appears to be at the very opposite of immortality. Rumors suspended between

immortality and jouissance: this is perhaps an excellent twin vantage point from which to consider rumors.

The idea that rumors may contain a contact with immortality, with the divine, is of long standing. The very concept of unwritten law implies the paradoxical existence of a kind of law that is ultimately relegated to hearsay and rumors. Written laws are based on the constitutive power of legislation, they are laid down formally (which is captured by the expression "the letter of the law"), whereas the power of unwritten laws derives precisely from the fact that their origin escapes us, that there is no ascertainable source. This is what makes them divine – beyond human when it comes to origins.[47] Rémi Brague, a great authority on the subject of divine law in different religious traditions, put it this way:

> For the Greeks, what has no assignable origin is divine. This is the case with rumors: they spread without anyone's knowing who began them; they are attributed to "someone," and they are believed with no other authority than themselves, or else simply because everyone is repeating them. According to Homer, such rumors (*ossa* or *phēmē*)

> come from Zeus; according to Hesiod, "Rumor is in some ways divine." The same idea lies behind the proverb, *vox populi, vox Dei.*[48]

Here are the lines from Hesiod that the quoted passage refers to:

> Rumour is a dangerous thing, light and easy to pick up, but hard to support and difficult to get rid of. No rumour ever dies that many folk rumour. She too is a goddess of a kind.[49]

Here is a paradoxical situation. The written law is not sufficient; the law fixed to the letter, and hence generally available and verifiable, needs to be supplemented by the unwritten law, which has its origin in the divine. But the unwritten law, supposedly divine, is consigned to rumors, which at the same time appear to be the lowest kind of language use; they are lower than opinions, but for this very reason they can figure as the highest, a kind of use situated above knowledge, above *logos*, and emanating directly from the divine.[50] The lowest and the highest literally coincide. (One is immediately reminded of Antigone and her evocation of divine laws, but I must confine

this to a note in brackets, or else it would take us too far.) There is a dual nature to rumors: they can function as bearers of unwritten laws – to use Lacan's formula, they can occupy the position of "the Other of the Other," the elusive divine big Other whose authority reaches beyond the man-made written laws and provides their anchor. The written laws have to refer their authority to the unwritten, that is, to voice, to hearsay – and rumors by their nature pertain to orality, even if they can be subsequently written down. The highest truth can be entrusted only to the most unreliable medium. On the other hand, rumors can function as destroyers of the big Other, undermining its authority – such were the rumors that ruined Socrates, and the law of *logos* was no match for them. The trouble is that, according to Lacan, "there is no Other of the Other," so we are stuck with this duplicity of the big Other – with what we referred to as the big Other and its double, the big Other and its shadow, the necessity and the impossibility to keep the two apart, the place where the shadow oscillates between the highest and the lowest, in a strange short-circuit.

The passage from Gogol doesn't go so far, it doesn't deal with unwritten laws, yet it implicitly

refers to this background, keeping it ironically down to earth, in a space where "the mortal" is defined by his/her urge to spread rumors (whose origins escape us) and where the "beyond mortal" is connected with the establishment of elementary social ties. Rumors figure as their necessary ingredient, social bonds are propelled and maintained by them. Hence the contrast between the informational insignificance of rumors and their vast reach: they have the capacity to inform the community by spreading not information, but the elusive substance of jouissance.

Gossip

I have used "rumors" as a generic term, taking it as roughly synonymous with gossip, hearsay, slander, calumny, tittle-tattle, and the like. All these entities have largely been an object of moral condemnation and critique in the entire tradition, but each of them has a slightly different shading, background, and field of reference. Some of them are obviously and strongly negative (denigration, backbiting, slander, calumny, etc.); rumors and gossip are nevertheless more neutral. They often function as quasi-synonyms, but we have come to

a point where we have to make a rough distinction between the two. The source of rumors cannot be ascertained; they circulate anonymously; one merely hears them and passes them on without subscribing to them, although this neutrality is very questionable and is largely propelled by schadenfreude, a malicious detachment, and an evasion of responsibility for what may well have very damaging effects. With gossip, on the other hand, the source is most often known. Gossip takes place in a circle of friends and acquaintances and concerns people one knows.[51] It is distinguished by a particular mode, marked not so much by imparting verifiable information as by speculation and the formation and exchange of attitudes and judgments, points of view, evaluations, and internal secrets that "others" are not privy to. It tests ideas that don't have to abide by the public standards of evidence and proof, but rather pertain to the informal and private ties of friendship and intimacy.[52] Gossip can thus function as basic social networking, establishing and maintaining social bonds that perhaps couldn't be set up at all without this essential constituent. Gossip is necessary to ascertain and sustain one's belonging to a community and one's standing in

it, to uphold the place one occupies in the social world and the reputation one enjoys. – I said earlier that rumors don't figure on Jakobson's list of the basic functions of language, but there may be some room for gossip as an elementary part of what he described as phatic communication – the kind that conveys no substantial information but only keeps the communicational channel alive, retaining the capacity to open it, verify it along the way, and close it if necessary. This is the function par excellence of greetings ("Hello!") and ritualistic or empty formulae with no proper content ("How are you?"). In the case of gossip, this function instigates and maintains inclusion in a group, but at the price of the concomitant exclusion of some, given that gossip by definition happens behind the back of the absent others, the objects of gossip. Shall we say bad rumors versus good gossip? Maybe not quite.

The idea that gossip is the basic function of language has its proponents among serious anthropologists and psychologists. The most famous in this respect is Robin Dunbar, author of a book with a telling title: *Grooming, Gossip, and the Origin of Language*. Grooming, in monkey societies, is a hands-on activity of taking care of

one another's furs and serves as a powerful agent in establishing social bonds and hierarchies. A lot of time, care, and energy is devoted to it. It is an elementary form of social networking – who grooms whom, who can expect benefits from grooming a higher-ranking individual, who bonds with whom: there is here a complicated combination of mutuality and hierarchy, and even a long-term strategic social calculation. Seen in this light, language – this is the author's dazzling suggestion – could ultimately look like "grooming at a distance":

> Could it be that language evolved as a kind of vocal grooming to allow us to bond larger groups than was possible using the conventional primate mechanism of physical grooming? . . . Language thus seems ideally suited in various ways to being a cheap and ultra-efficient form of grooming. . . . In a nutshell, I am suggesting that language evolved to allow us to gossip.[53]

This, then, would be the crucial step inaugurating humanity: the move from physical contact to a vocal tie through language. And the zero function of language would then be that of gossip.

From monkey society to society columns and TikTok there is but a slide, once this step has been accomplished. The use of gossip as a basic property of language can be empirically researched. The scrutiny of innumerable recorded conversations came to the following result:

> About two-thirds of conversation time is devoted to social topics. These include discussions of personal relationships, personal likes and dislikes, personal experiences, the behavior of other people and similar topics. . . . one of the most important things gossip allows you to do is to keep track of (and of course influence) other people's reputations as well as your own. Gossip . . . is all about the management of reputation.[54]

Most of the time, then, we use language as a vehicle for gossip, and the name of the game is social networking, establishing in-groups and out-groups, and particularly doing reputation management, an apposite concept.[55] This gossip function can be traced back to incipient uses of language in the formation of elementary social bonds, then pursued up to its flamboyant, cancer-like expansion in contemporary social media; but

is the latter merely an amplification of the same mechanism? We'll come back to this.

If we follow this line of thought, we have to conceive of gossip as a positive entity: good gossip serving a very basic social purpose and offering benefit. If rumors, gossip, slander, and so on generally appear as pathological, morally reprehensible, or at least trifling and trivial, can one conceive of something like an "authentic" gossip? Serious gossip, essential gossip? This is a line of argument amply illustrated in the delightful book on gossip by Patricia Meyer Spacks.[56] Her approach is that gossip, which is neither good nor bad in itself, should be considered in its particular functions and placed somewhere in between the two extremes of bad gossip and good gossip. At one end there is calumny, denigration, defamation, and character assassination, each driven by malice, envy, exclusion, or weaponization and often having harsh social and political consequences; in our times, this is what most often fuels something like cancel culture, for example. At the other end there is "serious" gossip, which caters for privacy, intimacy, solidarity, and shared pleasure, having the capacity to create and intensify human connections, to

speak the language of shared experience, to foster intelligence, and to serve as the catalyst of social processes; this is a basic form of socialization, which produces the very fabric of the social. The point is not so much to redeem gossip from its bad reputation as to display and scrutinize its dual or rather multiple nature, its utter ambiguity, its complexity against the almost univocal moral reprehension and condemnation that accompanied it throughout various traditions and to point out that its social function is absolutely necessary for human bonding. At the same time, the ambiguity of gossip stems from its own presupposition, namely that one always gossips about the absent. The ties among an in-group, which are promoted through gossip, always implicitly depend on the exclusion of an out-group, and an amicable bond has the nasty tendency of indulging in the power that one can exert over the absent others. It's ultimately a matter of us versus them, with shifting boundaries between the two – between who is in and who is out. The necessary social activity of gossip, fostering solidarity, is never quite free from the inextricable other side and can easily slide into the nasty logic of rumors.

Meyer Spacks's argument is not exactly new; there have been, in the same tradition, quite a few voices to stand up for gossip – from a pamphlet defending gossip in 1821 to (most remarkably) W. H. Auden in 1938[57] – but they were a small minority against the prevailing tone of condemnation. I have singled out Meyer Spacks as a particularly lucid, articulate, and perceptive voice; she presents a lot of background and proposes an astute reading of a number of English and American novels by way of building a case.[58] After all, literature, and of course novels in the first place, were written by authors who knew all along the complexity and ambivalence of gossip and explored at length its multiple and contradictory functions; it's just that one has to listen carefully to their implications. Meyer Spacks's book, published in 1985, marks perhaps a turning point, although it had some predecessors; at any rate it stands out in the literature on gossip. Most of the recent literature on the topic follows Spacks's general approach of analyzing complexity rather than dispensing moral judgments.[59]

One major function of gossip that has to be particularly valued is its capacity to form an alternative culture and an alternative community in

the face of the ruling ideology. It can serve as a resource for the underdog, for the oppressed and the dispossessed. First of all, there is a "spontaneous" propensity to ascribe gossip and rumors to women (we see it already in the personification of *fama* in ancient Rome: Fama was a goddess). Women are supposed to be especially dexterous in this area. If *logos* is male, does it follow that the other side of the big Other has a feminine face? The totality of *logos* versus the "not all" of feminine gossip? Man's proper use of language versus woman's alleged misuse, idle talk, perversion of *logos*?[60] The "natural" assumption of sexualizing the *logos* versus rumors and gossip divide is, of course, profoundly symptomatic of the nature and presuppositions of *logos* itself, of its tacit masculinist prejudice in its very universality. Still, this highly biased ascription nevertheless points to the function of gossip in forming a female alliance and finding resources to counteract male dominance. Women were historically excluded from the public sphere, so gossip served as a resource and form of empowerment. This was enough to instill in men a fear of women's bonding through gossip, which escapes control and can then serve as a screen for male fantasies – who knows what

women talk about among themselves, what dangers may lurk in their tittle-tattle, what secret, inaccessible jouissance they share, what remains out of men's reach. Hence the attitude of stark condemnation and dismissal, persistently repeated throughout ages and cultures, and the entrenched belief that gossip is empty, worthless, frivolous, of no consequence, and yet dangerous and threatening. Since gossip is about reputation management, the fear is that women's gossip may seriously put in jeopardy male reputation and supremacy. Gossip and rumors have indeed the power to turn the tables, so this fear is not just imaginary.

There is no doubt a democratic potential to gossip as a source of social bonding and empowerment for all groups that have limited or no access to the public sphere. In colonial contexts, the colonizers generally didn't speak the language of the colonized, so the latter could trade confidential information and maintain community cohesion in the face of oppression through the network of gossip.[61] This largely goes for all disempowered minorities: they have to rely on gossip as a vital resource. And it goes especially for black and queer communities, which have both found in

gossip a formidable means of creating alternative cultures and tools of resistance (I cannot expand on this topic here, but I can refer to some excellent literature).[62] Finally, as I know from personal experience, in socialist countries, where access to information was limited and the official sources were not to be trusted, for vital information one had to rely heavily, day by day, on rumors and gossip; and since rumors and gossip are not reliable either, the whole population developed intricate hermeneutical skills to sieve both official and unofficial sources. Rumors and gossip were essential for survival and solidarity.

This brings us finally to a larger point, namely the utter ambiguity of the constellation that we started from: the problem of the big Other and its shadow, a problem epitomized by the initial opposition between *logos* and rumors. There is the public and shiny side of the big Other, which aims at universality and offers a guarantee, while the shadowy flip side of rumors presents a figure of another big Other, one that possesses an unfounded yet unfathomable authority and threatens to undermine the former. Now we have seen that the shadowy flip side itself splits at least into two, as it were. In relation to *logos*, both

rumors and gossip represent the non-universal, the speech that cannot be universalized and is not properly grounded, yet has different valences, oscillating between the pernicious and the beneficial: at one end it threatens to undercut the authority that underpins the symbolic order, at the other end it points to the questionable nature of this very authority and displays its bias, its complicity with power, and the exclusion that its universality presupposes. In this sense, not only are rumors and gossip characterized by a lack of foundation in relation to the big Other, whose authority looks properly founded, but they also point at the shaky foundation of that authority itself. The big Other and its symptom, we said; and the symptom is profoundly revelatory of the inner impasse of the authority of the Other itself. This doesn't mean at all that we should give up on it, debunk it as an illusion, or simply denounce its oppressive nature; rather this calls for a constant engagement with its paradoxical nature. Rumors and gossip feature like an unvouched-for supplement of the big Other, its necessarily produced symptom, its stain, its question mark. Within this sphere, one can draw an opposition between the viciousness of rumors

and the advantages of gossip – and here rumors are construed as power over the powerless, gossip as the resource of power of the powerless, but the dividing line is shifting and has to be drawn always anew. It's more like they are both placed on a Moebius strip, the beneficial sliding easily into the detrimental. We find ourselves in the same predicament: there is no big Other without its double, but ultimately there is no Other of the Other.

Idle talk

Writers and novelists tended to be well aware of the complex nature of gossip: they followed its intricacies while managing to refrain from easy moral judgment. Not so moralists and philosophers, who were rather unanimous in condemning gossip and idle talk, deemed both frivolous and dangerous – as well as bereft of dignity and truth value. Although gossip is only talk, it can easily slide into depravity or reveal its lack of moral grounds. It is easy to draw an analogy with unlicensed sexual activity, where loose morality goes hand in hand with loose talk – "unbridled lust" with "unbridled tongues."[63]

It seems that something like an illicit incestuous pleasure could be involved, although it's just words; and this something has to be severely censored, brought in line with the official big Other of *logos*, otherwise general license might follow. Groundless talk leads to losing the ground.

Philosophers didn't pay much attention to gossip and idle talk, but when they did it was only with the intent to censor it or ban it to enable space for true philosophy. Among the many calls for a ban, let me quote just this hilarious proposal by Kierkegaard:

> If we could suppose for a moment that there was a law which did not forbid people talking, but simply ordered that everything that was spoken about should be treated as though it had happened fifty years ago, the gossips would be done for, they would be in despair. On the other hand, it would not really interfere with anyone who could really talk.[64]

This is an ingenious proposal: a law introducing a fifty-year compulsory delay, albeit in the mode of "as if," would introduce a virtual time lag between language and its reference, freeing

the former from context and from the speech situation, from its impact, from its performative power, and from its immediate effects. If such a beneficial law could be implemented, gossip would lose its foothold and strength, for it thrives only on the fleeting and the negligible. There is an opposition between gossip and "real talk," the latter referring to entities beyond the ephemeral, beyond the trifling concerns affected by the passing of time; this is where language should acquire and exercise its true performative power, which could reach eternity. Everything worthy should stand the fifty-year test, but not wait for fifty years to pass: it should start right now, as if the fifty years had already passed. And if such a decree is impossible, then it should be implemented by an act of will and imagination.

Kierkegaard's stance has to be viewed against the background of his harsh experience of being the victim of a vicious smear campaign in the *Corsair* affair. He started it himself: the Danish magazine *Corsaren* (*The Corsair*) praised his work and he indignantly defied it to berate it instead, on the grounds that "the indignity of being immortalized by *The Corsair* is too much to bear." He had it coming: *The Corsair* then

engaged in a campaign of ridicule, calumny, allegations, rumors, and scorn, famously claiming, among many other things, that Kierkegaard had uneven pant legs. Curiously, this was the detail that stuck and hurt most. This turned out indeed to be too much to bear for the master of irony: irony was no match for rumors, the campaign turned his life into misery.

> Every butcher boy believes that he's entitled to insult me on orders issued by *The Corsair*; the young university students smirk and giggle . . . The least thing I do, even if I merely pay a visit to someone, is mendaciously distorted and repeated everywhere. If *The Corsair* learns of it, it prints it, and it's read by the entire population.[65]

These were not anonymous rumors spreading by word of mouth, but a blatantly public campaign of denigration whose agent was in full display. No need for conspiracy theories, like with Rousseau. And, even if people didn't believe that any of it was true, the campaign nevertheless worked: everybody was spreading it and maliciously participating in his humiliation. He was framed, with no possible defense. If

Kierkegaard had chosen Socrates for his spiritual guide throughout his career, if he wanted to cut the figure of a Socrates for the new times, he ironically rejoined Socrates in sharing his fate: he was ruined by rumors, sentenced without a trial. There is agreement among Kierkegaard scholars that the *Corsair* affair was one of the major reasons for his bitterness and the turn to theology in his later work.

There is one philosopher who took gossip and rumors seriously, subsuming them to a more general theory of idle talk. Martin Heidegger saw idle talk not merely as a deplorable vice to be castigated but also as a structurally necessary entity. He took up idle talk in section 35 of *Being and Time*, as an extension and expansion of his analysis of the everyday mode of being, where one is delivered to the buzz of common discourse and its superficial understanding. This is the mode of what he calls *das Man*, commonly translated as "they," the neutral and impersonal mode that we employ in everyday speech and public usage and that sustains our common demeanor, the common inauthentic habitus, our embeddedness in accepted belief. Heidegger says that "Da-sein is initially and for the most part immersed in the

'they' and mastered by it."[66] The scrutiny of "they" and of idle talk of course aims at overcoming them, yet with an ontological intent that should be far removed from any moralizing critique.

> The expression "idle talk" [*das Gerede*] is not to be used here in a disparaging sense. Terminologically, it means a positive phenomenon which constitutes the mode of being of the understanding and interpretation of everyday Da-sein.[67]

If idle talk is to be taken as a positive phenomenon, this doesn't mean that it is valuable or good, but rather that it pertains to a certain mode in which being shows itself, notwithstanding its "inauthentic" nature. This mode of speech provides "average intelligibility"; everything is understood in the common acceptance of social conformity, but is understood "only approximately and superficially." This kind of discourse, which is commonly found in common sociality and constitutes it, doesn't attain the "primary relation of being to being talked about."

> It doesn't communicate in the mode of a primordial appropriation of this being, but communicates

> by *gossiping* and *passing the word along*. What is spoken about as such spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so.[68]

So idle talk, literally gossip (*Weiter- und Nachreden*), is endowed with an authority produced just by its being passed around – and this is not limited to word of mouth but encompasses "scribbling," written gossip, too (in fact most writing in this view ultimately amounts to scribbling). Furthermore, idle talk is indifferent to the division into private and public, it rather unites these two sides. ("The groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its being public, but encourages it.") Idle talk, by understanding everything, divests us of the task of genuine understanding.

> Discourse [*Rede*], which belongs to the essential constitution of being of Da-sein, and also constitutes its disclosedness, has the possibility of becoming idle talk [*Gerede*], and as such of not really keeping being-in-the-world open in an articulated understanding, but of closing it off and covering over inner-worldly beings.[69]

Die Rede, discourse, has the fatal tendency of sliding into *das Gerede*, idle talk, yet idle talk, despite its idle nature, still pertains to the essential constitution, as its inner possibility and actuality, albeit in the mode of closing proper understanding off. It determines the ways in which we perceive the world ("The they prescribes the attunement, it determines what and how one 'sees.'") This is an uprooted understanding that loses the connection to its ground but, as such, constitutes the everyday reality.

> Ontologically, this means that when Da-sein maintains itself in idle talk, it is . . . cut off from the primary and primordially genuine relations of being toward the world, toward *Mitda-sein*, toward being-in itself. It keeps itself in suspension and yet in doing so it is still always together with the "world," with the others, and toward itself.[70]

Given that we are always initially delivered to this circulating discourse, to this gossip that sustains itself by being circulated and repeated, we could say (in our terms) that, for Heidegger too, the shadowy Other comes first, as it were, and necessarily establishes its dubious authority.

It is against the background of this buzz that one must find one's way toward the proper use of language: a way out of this closure of idle talk to the disclosure of Being and a word that constitutes the proper response to the call, the voice of being. But what is called for is not the traditional authority of *logos*; for Heidegger's aim is precisely to get out of the constraints of ontology such as constituted by tradition, to undo the traditional ways of doing philosophy. This is because, in his view, this tradition itself actually presented another mode of forgetting of being, although in a very different way. The proper big Other, sustaining and sustained by authentic speech, is for him both an entity beyond the traditional *logos* and its gossipy shadow. Or rather *logos* can be taken as a good opening, but only if one is to reestablish its originary sense against the weight of tradition, the sense of disclosure, of letting something be seen.[71]

Heidegger tries to walk the thin line between the condemnation of idle talk – with no lack of disparaging judgments, despite his initial assurance – and the admission that, even in its inauthenticity, it is nevertheless a mode in which being presents itself, hence a necessary given that

cannot be dismissed by decree but demands a working through. The often haughty stance of condemnation is intertwined with the grudging admission of its essential function, the necessary backdrop against which one must find the way to the authentic speech and relation to being. "They" and idle talk are a necessary and essential backdrop against which the authentic response to the call of being can be deployed. But if all sociality is essentially defined by "they" and idle talk, both in private and in public, then the opening of authentic speech appears to be "beyond social"; it can be ultimately reached by espousing one's unique being-toward-death. Can there be a genuine social community that would evade idle talk, a community based on authentic speech, a communality beyond "they"? At this point one cannot but recall Heidegger's political history, on the one hand his life-long critique of liberal democracy as the very epitome of idle talk (one cannot quite disregard this subtext), and on the other hand the fatal choice of an "authentic" political project as an alternative: the proper community beyond idle talk turned out to offer a catastrophic prospect, the uprootedness of idle talk finding a counterpart and a solution in most calamitous

roots, and one cannot quite disentangle the one from the other. – Should Heidegger's perspicacious analysis of the regime of "they" and idle talk be dismissed, given his unforgiveable political history? Here I would rather follow the lucid formulation of Slavoj Žižek: "Why Heidegger took the right step (albeit in the wrong direction) in 1933."[72] Heidegger can serve as a sharp reminder that with gossip and rumors one is ultimately always also on political ground, their analysis entails political consequences, but the political lessons to be drawn have to take a radically different direction. How to conceive new forms of community and new shapes of universality?

Lost illusions

We started with the supposition that *logos* was an initial name for the authority of the big Other – this is a shorthand for what philosophy, when it emerged in ancient Greece, tried to establish as the foundation of true knowledge, against the authority of mythical beliefs and the realm of *doxa* ("opinion"); and this is what largely determined the fate of our western culture, for better or worse. But, since its emergence, *logos* was at

all times accompanied by its double, its shadow, epitomized by rumors endowed with a mysterious power in spite of their lack of foundation.[73] *Logos* was an endangered species from the start, its history is a history of the vagaries that we have been following through the lens of rumors.

Let's say, in this very cursory account, that reason, the great slogan of the Enlightenment, was the modern version of the big Other, with the faith in its power and its unstoppable progress, supported by science, extended through huge technological advances, the idea of a democratic social order, economic rationality, the prospect of freedom and prosperity. The Enlightenment had its moment of victorious glory, it (supposedly) swept away the false traditional authorities of patriarchal fathers, church, sovereigns, transcendence, and so on along with their commands and prohibitions, all the instances of the false big Other, to install the rule of the true big Other of reason. Yet doesn't the entire subsequent history of modernity look like a long story of waning, decline of this big Other, and resurgence of its shadow?

How did rumors make their comeback after Figaro had emblematically done away with them?

One of the most formidable weapons of the Enlightenment was the vast expansion of education and the stark increase in general literacy, but this had an immediate unwanted effect. As a result of its rapid and broad diffusion, print turned out to be an ideal medium for spreading rumors. Witness another great literary work: Balzac's novel *Lost Illusions*, written in 1837–43, which depicts French society during the Bourbon Restoration, when the revolutionary enthusiasm had run out and the dreary reality of capitalism set in. It tells the story of a young man, Lucien de Rubempré, who leaves the provinces for Paris, hoping to achieve literary glory, and starts off by accepting a temporary job at a newspaper. This part of the story allows us to see how in the 1820s the recently established mass press in France thrived on scandal mongering, vicious rumors, calumny, insinuations, intrigues, defamation, and character assassination. Blatant lies and ruthless practices such as making up stories were endemic – and all for large instant profits. The plot need not concern us any further, but of course the young man is bound to come to a bad end. It is surprising to see that what we call today yellow or tabloid press was such an

enormous business enterprise already in the first half of the nineteenth century. The moment is telling: for the first time in history, it had become technically possible to print such large print runs overnight. And, also for the first time, the level of public literacy was so high that the press could reach vast numbers of people much faster than ever before. The consequence was that the best means of enlightened progress were simultaneously serving the shadowy big Other. This gave rise, already in 1820s' Paris, to concerns about the spread of fake news and the advent of a post-truth age. One can recall that Hegel (who died in 1831) famously said that reading the morning newspaper has become the realist's morning prayer. The newspaper as if replaced religious authority, so reading it was the morning prayer of the modern bourgeois age.[74] – As the novel unfolds, one realizes that the title is iconic: the Enlightenment's illusions were already lost by that stage, in the 1820s.

The Balzac moment can serve as a kind of parable of what was to come with the process of general mediatization of the modern world: it offers the prospect of a short circuit across almost two centuries. A recent French movie based on

this novel, *Lost Illusions* (2021),[75] is indeed fueled by the ambition to hold a mirror to our present age and draw a parallel. The methods of the nineteenth century may appear crude and amateurish in comparison to the technical possibilities and sophisticated ways of mass manipulation we have today, but the arch between the novel and its retelling in the movie is astounding. There is a quick slide, as far as yellow press is concerned, from Lucien de Rubempré via Citizen Kane to Rupert Murdoch, to be followed and paralleled by the rise of television in the second half of the twentieth century, a phenomenon that established a far more extensive and effective doubling of reality. The Enlightenment's dream found its major deployment in the mixed blessings of a mediatized society. The media became the common background buzz:[76] they now shape the public sphere and extend into the far recesses of privacy. As the big Other of reason progressed, so did its shadow.

Still, throughout the twentieth century, even as the media were spreading and gradually advancing toward supremacy, the big Other was nevertheless maintained, at least structurally and formally. It was maintained in the guise of the

public sphere (notwithstanding private ownership), the space of addressing a general audience. To put it simply, mass media were based on a stark demarcation between the few who write for newspapers and the mass of people who read them, or between the few who appear on television and the mass of people who watch them. The very term "broadcast" implied that the emission – the content aired – was addressed to a wide audience whose members viewed the same thing at the same time; thus it provided a space for shared meanings and the prospect of communality, however strained. The public standards of accountability, verifiability, relevance, decency, and so on were still upheld, at least as points of reference and as a general framework, even if they were now manipulated in all kinds of new ways. But all this is what is now called "the old media." They can still be seen as a far extension of the Balzac moment, which, despite bringing bitter disillusionment, kept the framework in place.

But as the century was drawing to its end, the Internet brought a wholly new dimension to all these developments. The climax (so far) in the new century was reached by social media, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, WhatsApp, forums,

YouTube, X, Meta . . . This is where our story of the big Other and its shadow ceases being a magnification of something that started in Paris under Restoration (to take an arbitrary signpost) and gets instead a different and most troubling twist. When it first appeared, the Internet seemed indeed to be the paramount realization of the Enlightenment's dream: its initially utopian promise of instant access to information, unparalleled in history; its enormously facilitated communication across the planet; the prospect of emancipation, decentralization, and democratization – all these features were prolonging and enhancing the Enlightenment project. But at the same time one immediately realizes that there is nothing like the Internet and social media when it comes to spreading rumors; they do it instantly and in vast quantities. Besides, with robots, statistically targeted audiences, and carefully steered secret algorithms, one doesn't even need human agency any more. The Internet, in its short history, seems to have accomplished a quick turn from being the new instrument of the Enlightenment to being the most efficient propagator of rumors and conspiracy plots – only to be surpassed, equally quickly, by social media.

This is where one would have to propose a new diagnosis: a general *rumorization* of society. We have been rumorized.

The demise of the big Other?

There are some stark differences or new features that the Internet and social media introduced, and these differences entail the collapse of underlying formal categories and borderlines. Let me put it, schematically, in five points. First, whereas with the old media, however problematic they were, there was always a structural demarcation between producers and consumers, with the new media we have come to be, in the space of a few decades, constantly engaged in being simultaneously producers and consumers (indeed "produsers," a most apposite new term), actors and spectators, voyeurs and exhibitionists, exchanging roles within seconds, almost each hour of our lives. There was a time when one could say: "My friend was on TV last night." Now it's impossible to say: "My friend was on the Internet or on Facebook last night." We are all constantly on the Internet and on Facebook, whether we want to or not, and even if we are

not, if we decide to stay away from all this, we will inevitably learn, soon enough, what's going on on social media and in the infinite vastness of the web. Unlike broadcast in old media, the web may be worldwide and span all geographical distances, but it is based on collapsing the distance between producers and spectators, thereby losing the capacity to broadcast. "The Internet does not have a center from which content is broadcast and to which our collective gaze is turned; in the same way, the Internet does not guarantee a space of shared meaning."[77] It is the ideal medium of general rumorization, where nothing quite carries the stamp of the big Other and where at the same time every slight rumor leaves a trace and turns into a permanent record.

There is a corollary to this. Earlier in this book I have briefly touched on the strange parallel between rumors and capital, two entities that, mysteriously, grow just by circulating. This parallel was drawn in abstract terms, but gained a whole new and very material meaning with this recent development. Information technologies have fused completely with financial capital, to the point where information has itself become the bearer and producer of capital, indistinguishable

from its flow. One can now speak of finance and information capital as a single entity,[78] given the close symbiosis of the two. The consequence is that the way in which the spread of information goes closely hand in hand with the spread of rumors immediately translates into capital expansion: one growth by circulation immediately converts into the other. The collapse of the separation between producers and users, creating a new quasi-universal class of produsers, yields a new form of proletariat, so to speak: by constantly uploading and downloading pictures, videos, texts, music, or scrolling vacation plans, by constantly using the platforms to get information and simultaneously to give it, we all turned into unpaid workers of the new form of digital capitalism and subjected ourselves to its surveillance and furtherance. In our free time, surfing the net and scrolling on our smartphones, we constantly contribute to the new forms of capital that increasingly use platforms as their main sites of deployment. We are becoming "cloud serfs," to use Varoufakis's apposite term. There are proposals to call this new constellation platform capitalism (Nick Srnicek), surveillance capitalism (Shoshana Zuboff), or even technofeudalism (Yanis Varoufakis),[79] given that these new

forms tend to bypass the classic capitalist market. I cannot enter here into a wider discussion on the merits and problems of these suggestions; my aim here is to propose rumors as a particularly telling entry point into this conundrum, in symptomatic complicity with a number of other developments. Our social lives tend to be increasingly driven by gossip and rumors, a realm where nothing quite carries the hallmark of the big Other, immediately coinciding with the deployment of new forms of capital.

Second, by yielding produsers, the collapse of the first separation is closely connected to the fate of the separation between opinion and knowledge. Perhaps the crucial symptomatic term is information: one speaks of information technologies and of an information age, but what is information? The inherent tendency in the digital world is for information to be broken down into a set of facts that are treated as separate entities and packages, extricated from their context, detached from reasons and justification, from discursive mediation, form their internal connections and contradictions, from their wider implications, their evaluation, their genesis and their development – from everything

that constitutes the basis of knowledge, with the extensive intellectual labor it requires. Once information is broken down and singularized in this way, it can be easily conflated with opinions, so that facts, information, opinions, and knowledge start functioning at the same level, as interchangeable or equivalent. In this neutralization and equalization, the authority of knowledge is hardly recognizable and extremely difficult to impose. This can be summed up in a short diagnosis: the more there is information, the less there is knowledge. We have started from the point where philosophy established itself through a sharp divide between opinion and knowledge; now, at this most dramatic turn where knowledge would seem to be more widely available than ever, the divide is increasingly being dissolved.[80] The rule of information – the neutral term that defines our age – is conducive precisely to rumorization: rumors tend to carry the day. This transformation has been accompanied by a drastic decline of newspapers and print media, with the consequence that anybody can spread information, and by a general decline of reading skills and habits among the generations of children who grow up screens in hand.

Third, the further distinction that is being dissolved in this process is that between public and private. Facebook was founded in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, WhatsApp in 2009, Instagram in 2010, WeChat in 2011, TikTok in 2016: they are all incredibly recent inventions and it is rather staggering that less than twenty years on we cannot imagine our public and private lives without them. It is unprecedented in human history that, in the fusion of financial and platform economies, vast numbers of people, actually the majority of the world's population – and this includes public service employees, politicians, and not least presidents and prime ministers, especially after the so-called Twitter presidency – voluntarily moved the bulk of their private and public activities to a few privately owned platforms that are based on undisclosed algorithms and are subject to extremely powerful mechanisms of surveillance, control, commercial exploitation, and manipulation. This development has massively contributed to the rumorization of society – by which I mean a situation in which rumors start functioning not as a shadow that accompanies public discourse and knowledge, but as a general

background noise against which some basic distinctions are increasingly blurred. The process has been supported and increased by cases of state deregulation such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (along with the Communications Decency Act, which, despite its intention, served as a major lever of deregulation)[81] – cases passed under the pressure of privatizing the Internet and fatally lowering the standards of liability and justification, since they largely absolved the providers of their responsibility for the provided content. Other oppositions have collapsed in the same way – the distinction between the verified and the unverified, the distinction between the relevant and the irrelevant, the distinction between the decent and indecent – contributing to the normalization of misinformation and of "alternative facts." The last one is particularly tricky to define. There are no hard and fast rules by which to tell the decent from the indecent, one has to rely on the elusive notion of public and private sensibilities. Yet in the absence of clear rules one nevertheless knows clearly when the boundary is transgressed – and with the rise of populist leaders, this is perhaps the most dramatic development: the normalization of

indecency. Rumorization and populism go hand in hand.

From information to misinformation and rumor there is but a step: this line is so easy to cross in a general buzz where the secret enjoyment taken in spreading rumors, the peculiar schadenfreude related to this activity, is getting the upper hand. Serious research has shown that in social media false reports spread six times as fast and a hundred times as frequently as verifiable news.[82] Of course, they tend to be more intriguing; they are scandalous, picturesque, outrageous, they easily grab attention, they are more fun, and, as with rumors, one doesn't need to subscribe to them while sharing them. We are reminded of Gogol and the irresistible push to transmit what one has heard; but Gogol's small provincial town has turned now into a global provincial town of overbearing proportions, where at the end of the day the conclusion is not "see what lie they're spreading," but the growing impossibility to disentangle the lie from truth in this general avalanche. The two faces of Janus are as if blended together.

Fourth, we have already seen that the logic of both rumors and gossip is different from that of

conspiracy theories, which are the major feature of Internet and social media culture. What is at stake in conspiracy theories is neither a quasi-neutral stance of not subscribing to rumors while spreading them nor the horizontal social networking of gossip, but rather an adamant conviction about the true state of affairs that would have to come to light and is being obfuscated by an assumed systematic concerted effort to suppress it. In this mental universe, everybody is either collaborating or duped, except for "us." The opposition is between true insight, possessed by a few, and a false appearance that has to be dismantled – and we have seen in Rousseau's case how conspiracy theories were also born out of the spirit of the Enlightenment. They are the obverse of rumors; they try to convert an inconsistent array of rumors into a system with a hidden clue, a source of true knowledge – as opposed to the official falsehood and deception. They try to transform contingent scraps and baseless allegations into the hidden hard core of a veiled essence – there are no coincidences in this universe, everything is part of a system. They are based on firm belief in the existence of the big Other, but in the form of a great deceiver who pulls the strings. With the Internet

and social media, this distinction tends to collapse as well: rumors are easily converted into conspiracies so that one can hardly tell them apart. Take the QAnon, the wild allegations of pedophile rings, the great replacement theory, the cultural Marxism theory, stealing the elections, Mexican hordes, Soros, Covid . . .[83] – all these are widely (and wildly) circulated as rumors that quickly solidify into adamant convictions, which become self-fueling and resistant to proof and argument. *Fama crescit eundo*, rumor increases as it spreads; and this amplification quasi-automatically tends to transform rumors into conspiracy theories.

Misguided as they are, conspiracy theories are not to be simply discarded, but their kernel of truth is to be sought at the opposite end. The recent movie *Don't Look Up*[84] is a case in point. Conspiracy theories often try to convince us that the apocalypse is near (this is one of their themes); many signs announce it to the elected few, but in this movie it is predicted by science and supported by hard evidence. A comet is approaching the earth and, unless we act promptly and decisively, the end of the world is unavoidable. In response to these facts there is like a tripartite conspiracy of the liberal media (the model is not Fox News, but

rather CNN), the political establishment, and the corporate world (where Mark Rylance's character combines Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates, just as Meryl Streep's character, the US president, shamelessly combines Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton). They all, as if in collusion, dismiss the information about the lethal comet that's supported by science and treat it as another rumor – or, even worse, in a further step they see it as a business opportunity. They defuse the impact of the truth, reducing it either to an unconfirmed rumor or to another big business venture. They act like conspirators – only there is no plot, no organized conspiracy, no secret agreement. In reality the situation is far worse: this is a spontaneous conspiracy that no conspiracy theory can account for. There is no mastermind, no master plan, it's a structural conspiracy, more efficient than what conspiracy theories try to conjure. Here is a concept proposed by Alenka Zupančič to describe this conundrum: conspiracy without a conspiracy theory.[85] Perhaps this is the best term to capture this connivance of the political, corporate, military, and media worlds in the absence of a mastermind or master plan and in spite of their internal rivalries and fights for dominance.

But there is a wider implication: couldn't capitalism itself be ultimately conceived of as just such a conspiracy without conspiracy – a conspiracy that imposes the rule of One that subtends all conflicts and diversity, but is not orchestrated from the center by some mastermind? In this sense conspiracy theories, the obverse and the counterpart of rumors, hit upon a grain of the real, if in perverted form.

Finally, there is a major paradox that pertains to the unprecedented facilitation of communication. We reached a kind of enlightenment utopia where everybody can be in contact with everybody in a new global community, yet this produced a situation that can be summed up like this: the more communication there is, the more the basic social ties seem to fall apart. How can this be? The paradox has been signalled by a number of perceptive theorists. Here is Joseph Vogl's way of putting it:

> [P]recisely the greatest possible and global inclusion of users through the accumulation of network effects is linked to processes of particularization. . . . The universalization of information standards constitutes the precondition for the production

> of particularized forms of community. . . . The generality of codes and information is thereby confronted by a process that culminates in self-contained social monads, and the universalization of information capital is guaranteed precisely by producing disconnected particularities.[86]

What I proposed to call rumorization points at the spurious nature of the universality that has been implemented via this global network, or rather at the glaring disparity between the global and the universal. The big Other of *logos* and reason has been accompanied by the shadowy big Other of rumors from the outset, and we tried to follow the meandering story of their incongruous interplay. Rumors presented the part of the non-universalizable as the counterpart to the prospect of the universal; they were taken as a vintage case of something that is by its very nature unfounded and fickle, yet produces serious effects, and at times fatally so. The new technological turn, concerning information and communication, the two basic functions of language, brought rumors to an unparalleled level in terms of sheer quantity, speed, and global reach. The prevalence of this shady double is now looming; the breeze

of rumors is steadily growing into a whirlwind where the stark differences and contrasts between the two figures of the Other gradually evaporate. This process entails the dwindling of the public sphere, once the formal place of the big Other, and thereby fosters the particularization of bubbles and detached communities, processes of monadization, the severance of communal space. It is the ideal medium for the multiplication of bubbles, hence the rise of populism coincides exactly with this turn; but the obverse of the multiplication process is the fact that this cacophony of messages, voices, and images nevertheless contributes – covertly – to the logic of the new forms of capital that underlie all the apparent heterogeneous diversity. And the more global the reach, the more the prospect of universality gets lost and the social falls apart. There is an overkill in relation to what used to be the dream of the Enlightenment, freely available information and free communication – an overkill to be taken quite literally, a too-muchness that is devastating.

As I already said, the Balzac moment, with its lost illusions, reminds us that, when the newspaper and print media emerged, they elicited similar fears and outcries as the social media do

now; even at that stage people would foresee the advent of a post-truth age and the eclipse of reason – and this process coincided with the normalization of capitalism. One could say that each technological invention had a similar side effect: they produced gloomy predictions that sounded the death knell for *logos* and reason. One could ironically extend this back to Plato: no printing press in his age, of course, but in classical Athens even writing itself could be seen as a danger to truth, disrupting the proper medium of philosophy. Socrates, the harbinger of truth and *logos*, famously never wrote anything; the proper big Other would have to be entrusted to the voice. Thus, throughout history, each new technological development was accompanied by the prospect of catastrophe, so that the march of *logos* through the philosophical tradition was symptomatically tainted by a proclivity for technophobia – as if technical advances always worked hand in hand with the shadowy other side of the big Other. One could say that there is nothing really original in the idea that new technologies sound the death knell for truth and *logos* and that the decline of *logos* is as old as *logos* itself. *Logos* has been declining from the start, yet it has never succumbed

– can this inspire some circumspect optimism? If I arrived at these gloomy conclusions at the end of my brief trajectory, this saga of rumors and their diverse facets, by extrapolating the ominous tendencies, the intention is on the one hand to point to the high stakes of the present predicament of rumorization and on the other hand to call for trust and courage in the face of this trial, perhaps the most difficult one that the other of *logos* and reason was ever confronted with.

Can a look at history inspire the invention of new strategies? Can we learn anything from the long history of rumors that I tried to draw? Or is it rather that, as Hegel put it, nothing can be learned from history except the fact that nothing can be learned from history?

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Notes

1 As presented by Kathryn Jepsen, "Famous Higgs analogy, illustrated." *Symmetry* magazine, September 6, 2013. https://www.symmetrymagazine.org/article/september-2013/famous-higgs-analogy-illustrated.

2 I owe this observation to Henrik Jøker Bjerre. In many languages the impersonal form is used for rumors that could be freely rendered as "it speaks (itself)" (e.g. Italian "*si dice*," Slovenian "*govori se*" along with other Slav languages, etc.), evoking the Lacanian adage *ça parle*, which is Lacan's designation of the unconscious at its minimal: *it speaks*.

3 Virgil uses Fama (< *fama* "report," "rumor," "reputation," "tradition,"), which is the name of the Roman goddess of rumor and gossip but also of fame and reputation – the flip side of the former. Her counterpart in the Greek world was Pheme (*Phēmē* < φήμη/φάμα "utterance," "report," "(good) repute," "fame," "tradition"), daughter of the goddess Gaia, the Earth

– so she was there from (almost) the first beginnings of Greek cosmology. There can be no origin without rumor immediately sneaking in.

4 *Aeneid* 4.174–177 and 183–187, in Kline's translation; see Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. A. S. Kline (ebook: Poetry in Translation, 2002). https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/VirgilAeneidIV.php#anchor_Toc342021.

5 See Octave Mannoni, "I Know Well, but All the Same . . .," trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, edited by Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 68–92.

6 See Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (London: Verso, 2014).

7 Plato, *Apology* 18b–19a, trans. G. M. E. Grube; see Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 19.

8 In this exact form, the maxim comes from a 1623 treatise by Francis Bacon (*De augmentis scientiarum* 8.2.34), but its origin is Greek – namely a passage in Plutarch's treatise *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*: an admirer of Alexander the Great "recommended attacking boldly and biting with slanders, advising that, even if the victim manages to recover from the wound, the scar nevertheless remains" (65d). The Latin maxim was recorded in Hans Walther's monumental collection of medieval proverbs (*Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis medii aevi*).

9 No doubt there are countless examples of this in different cultures, so any choice is somewhat arbitrary.

There is a danger of drawing up a catalogue of picturesque anecdotes that can be infinitely multiplied, but I will try to limit it to a small array of significant cases subsumed under a theoretical red thread.

10 I owe this suggestion to a question from the audience at the University of Dundee, where I presented an early version of this project in January 2019.

11 See Aristotle, *Politics* 1, 1257a–1258a.

12 The quoted lines (135–139) are more complex in their contextuality and ambiguity than a number of other Shakespearean lines to the same effect. Here are three examples from Shakespeare's plays: "Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes" (*Hamlet* 1.3.38), a line in which Laertes warns his sister Ophelia about the same predicament; "Backwounding calumny the whitest virtue strikes" (*Measure for Measure*, 3.2.174); and "Calumny will sear virtue itself" (*The Winter's Tale*, 2. 1.37). And here is another telling quotation from Shakespeare's time: "Backbiters do kill more men with a word / Than soldiers in field destroy with their sword" (Thomas Churchyard, 1594, quoted in Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

13 This of course calqued on Lacan's famous prosopopoeia of truth: *moi, la vérité, je parle*, "I, truth, speak" (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: Norton, p. 340). Lacan's point is precisely that this prosopopoeia adopts an impossible position of enunciation. Truth in psychoanalysis always emerges from "it speaks," not from "I, truth, speak," and in Lacan's ironic exercise this is what truth in person clearly declares.

14 Is Rumour a "he"? Can a man be a valid personification of rumor, given that that a long tradition largely ascribes this activity to women? We'll come back to that.

15 Visit https://www.etymonline.com/word/gossip.

16 This comment, translated here by me, appears only in the Slovene original version of the book; it is omitted in the English version. Alenka Zupančič, *Poetika, druga knjiga* [*Poetics, Book 2*] (Ljubljana: Analecta, 2004), p. 134.

17 The sequel, *The Marriage of Figaro*, was put to music by Mozart in 1786, to an Italian libretto famously titled *Le nozze di Figaro*, so paradoxically two operas competing for the title of the most popular opera of all times – Mozart's *Figaro* and Rossini's *Barber* – are both based on Beaumarchais's Figaro comedies; and opera lovers two centuries later have to be well versed in their convoluted intrigues.

18 For the Italian libretto, visit www.murashev.com/opera/Il_barbiere_di_Siviglia_libretto_Italian_English.

19 There were indeed several musical adaptations of *The Barber* before Rossini, most notably by Giovanni Paisiello in 1782. This one enjoyed great popularity in its days and is still revived occasionally. The famous disaster of the opening night of Rossini's *Barber* in February 1816 was largely orchestrated by the followers of Paisiello.

20 See Michel Foucault, "Introduction to Rousseau's *Dialogues*," in his *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 33.

21 "[A]gainst the Surveillance-Signs system" of calumny and persecution, "he demands admittance into the Trial-Punishment system as a liberation" (ibid., p. 46).

22 See Christofer Kelly and Roger D. Masters, "Introduction," in *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990), p. xv.

23 *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990), p. 222.

24 Ibid., p. 247.

25 Ibid., p. 248.

26 Ibid., p. 254.

27 This was Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, a German-born close collaborator of Diderot in the *Encyclopaedia*; he was known for his *Correspondence littéraire, philosophique et critique*, which listed many sovereigns among its subscribers. He had connections with Catherine the Great and with Mozart. Not to be confused with one of the brothers Grimm.

28 Ibid., p. 233.

29 See Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

30 There are many English versions of this sentence: "Someone must have traduced Joseph K." (Willa and Edwin Muir); "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K." (David Wyllie); "Someone must have slandered Joseph K." (Breon Mitchell); "Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K." (Mike Mitchell); "Someone must have made a false accusation against Joseph K." (Idris Parry), etc. Let's keep "rumors" for the present purpose, in my own

suggested translation (otherwise I use the Willa and Edwin Muir version: Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, New York: Schocken Books, 1987). For the German original, visit www.digbib.org/Franz_Kafka_1883/Der_Prozess.

31 With Rousseau, as opposed to K., the slanderers were well known and specified – under the cover of "gentlemen" one would clearly find the philosophers and the authorities. Rousseau, as opposed to K., had to devise a fictional trial himself, not as a prolongation of rumors but as a protective measure against them. This allowed him to expound his drawn-out apology, which no one else would listen to. The common point with Josef K. is that Rousseau, too, often complained that he didn't even know what the rumors accuse him of and presented himself as a victim of "rumor as such": the form of rumor rather than a particular content. And, finally, there is also like an inverted Kafkaesque conclusion, namely that the (imaginary) court may reach the exonerating verdict, which has no effect.

32 Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), p. 101.

33 José Saramago, *The Notebooks* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 257.

34 I owe this observation to Alex García Düttmann.

35 Kafka could have written the sentence in the indicative mode, *ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hat*, which is grammatically correct. The difference is that in the indicative mode (*hat*) the subject of enunciation implicitly subscribes to what is said, whereas in the subjunctive mode (*hätte*) s/he takes a distance from

the enounced content, which may be true or not: its truth is a conjecture – it is "presumably" true, "I" don't want to commit myself. In other words, it is subject to rumors.

36 One could draw a distant parallel with the opening of the second part of *Henry IV*, where Rumour appears only in the prologue, introducing the drama and setting it off, after which he disappears and the play never comes back to it. But in *The Trial* we can never see or hear the initiating rumor.

37 Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 20–36.

38 See Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," a story based on "branding" the letter of the law onto the body (Kafka, *Complete Stories*, pp. 140–167). This piece was written during the time he was working on *The Trial*.

39 Miguel de Cervantes, *Exemplary Stories*, trans. Lesley Lipson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 263. I owe this reference to Aaron Schuster.

40 Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350–360. To wit, these are the referential function, the emotive function, the conative function, the phatic function, the metalingual function, the poetic function.

41 Cervantes, *Zgledne novele* (trans. Anton Debeljak, Ljubljana: Slovenski knjižni zavod, 1951), p. 470. There is now a new translation available, published in 2021, (sadly) with no such additions.

42 More precisely, *govorica* is the generic term that encompasses *jezik*, "language," and *govor*, "speech";

it corresponds more or less to *langage* in French. Slovenian seems to be unique in this respect, although I haven't done any thorough research. Other etymologies (in languages I am familiar with) are based on metaphors: noise or shouting (English *rumor* from French *rumeur* – both from Latin *rumor*, just like Italian *rumore*), murmur (Spanish *murmuración*), voice (Serbo-Croatian *glasine*), calling (German *Gerücht* from *rufen*; the same in Scandinavian languages, *rykte* etc.), hearing (Russian *sluhi*). It seems that only in Slovenian the notion of "language" is expressed by the same word as the notion of "rumors." The difference is most often (but not necessarily) marked by the singular–plural divide (language–languages): the plural turns the unity of language into a multiplicity of rumors.

43 Cervantes, *Exemplary Stories*, p. 266.

44 *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein*, edited by Walter Boehlich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). This is an excellent and well documented volume, where among other things we can see Freud trying his hand at writing poetry in Spanish (pp. 42–43) and a quasi-Homeric epic poem in hexameters in German (pp. 133–138); and it also features a discussion about the procreation of the eels, a topic that Freud was researching during his short stay in Trieste.

45 There is a most curious "will to organization," – a drive, a push: why would two teenage boys learning Spanish need an organizational framework, with insignia and all? Were they requiring the guarantee of the

big Other? Isn't there like a tiny premonition here of the later fate of psychoanalytic associations?

46 Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 202. Let me add a personal anecdote: shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine some of my Russian friends contacted me in the hope of keeping up our collaboration under the new desperate circumstances. I sent them some of my recent texts, including one on rumors, with this passage from Gogol. They had the texts translated and wanted to publish them in a book. When it came to choosing the title, they suggested the quotation "See what a lie they're spreading!" I was reluctant, fearing that this may get them into trouble, but they insisted. The book was published with the suggested title: Mladen Dolar, *Posmotrite, kakuyu lozh raspustili* [*See what a lie they're spreading*] (Saint Petersburg: Skifija-print, 2022) – with the poker-face pretext that this is just a quote from a great Russian classic.

47 I must refer to the magisterial work on this by Yuval Kremnitzer, *The Emperor's New Nudity: The Return of Authoritarianism and the Digital Obscene* (forthcoming).

48 Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 21.

49 *Works and Days*, lines 760–764; see Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, trans. M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 59.

50 "The epistemic weakness of the rumor is the secret of

its power. Just as the effectiveness of the rumor does not depend on the ability to verify or refute it, so the unwritten law does not depend on enforcement" (Kremnitzer, *The Emperor's New Nudity*).

51 Or else the celebrities, but this is a slightly different genre, which would demand separate scrutiny.

52 For a good analysis and defense of gossip and its subversive epistemological value, see Karen Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Radzik, in an insightful paper, gives a rough definition of gossip as "*private, informal . . . idle, evaluative communication about persons who are absent*" (Linda Radzik, "Gossip and Social Punishment," *Res Philosophica* 93.1 (2016), p. 187).

53 Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 79.

54 Ibid., p. 123.

55 The concept was proposed, among others, by Emler; see Nicholas Emler, *Gossip, Reputation, and Social Adaptation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

56 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

57 For a list, see ibid., p. 342 and passim. Compare W. H. Auden, "In Defense of Gossip," *The Living Age* magazine, February 1, 1938, pp. 534–538.

58 The list of the analyzed novels is long, running from Jane Austen to Eudora Welty via James Boswell, Elizabeth Gaskell, W. M. Thackery, George Eliot, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Anthony Trollope, William Faulkner,

Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, and quite a few more. See also Nicola Parsons, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Nicholas Hammond, *Gossip, Sexuality and Scandal in France (1610–1715)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

59 See in particular Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power*; then also e.g. the telling title of Emrys Westacott, *The Virtues of Our Vices: A Modest Defense of Gossip, Rudeness, and other Bad Habits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) and the interdisciplinary essays in Francesca Giardini and Rafael Wittek (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

60 In the Christian universe, this goes back to original sin, instigated by Eve's foolish talk.

61 I owe this reminder to a reader's report.

62 See e.g. Patricia Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African–American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Gary Alan Fine and Patricia Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

63 Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 38.

64 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 72; quoted in Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 29.

65 I quote from https://teol.ku.dk/skc/english/about-soeren-kierkegaard/the-global-dane-soeren-kierkegaard-

teologian-philosopher-author/the-corsair. Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, from which the quotation was taken, was originally published in the middle of the affair, in 1846.

66 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 156.

67 Ibid., p. 157.

68 Ibid., p. 158.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., p. 159.

71 Ibid., p. 29.

72 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 120.

73 One can add that sophistry was the historical counterpart to philosophy soon after the latter's inception; and it shares many facets with rumors – say, the question of efficiency vs. truth, the type of discourse that works and produces effects without having a foundation in logos, undermining the very groundwork of logos – hence Socrates's, Plato's, and Aristotle's crusade against sophistry. But this would demand another extensive treatment. For one of the best accounts of sophistry, see Barbara Cassin, *L'effet sophistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

74 "Reading the morning newspaper is a sort of realistic morning prayer. One orients one's attitude toward the world either by God or by what the world is. The former gives as much security as the latter, in that one knows how one stands" (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Jenaer Schriften 1801–1807*, Frankfurt am Main:

Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 547). This passage stems from Hegel's waste-book notes, already jotted down by 1803–1806 and first published in 1842. The quotation is most remarkable in the poker-face irony of a direct parallel between the old and the new authority, the divine and the press, both of which provide equally questionable security.

75 *Illusions perdues* (dir. Xavier Giannoli, 2021), a lavish production with a star cast (Gérard Depardieu, Cécile de France, Xavier Nolan, etc.), was the French entry for Oscars. The film is loosely based on the first two parts of the novel. Balzac himself, by the way, engaged in newspaper business at the time and miserably failed, but knew the milieu inside out.

76 For the best literary testimony on this phenomenon, see Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, published in 1985 by Viking Press.

77 Kremnitzer, *The Emperor's New Nudity*, where this argument is amply developed: "The rumor is an archaic model of viral propagation, which on the Internet replaces the centralized model of the broadcast. . . . Unlike television, the Internet does not provide the possibility of distinguishing the inside from the outside."

78 For a thorough and well-documented argument on this development, see Joseph Vogl, *Capitalism and Ressentiment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).

79 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019); Yanis Varufakis, *Technofeudalism* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2023).

80 "Opinion as such, the circulation of standpoints and points of view, has become the yardstick for all statements on the private information markets, and it is precisely this liberation from rules of liability and justification of all kinds that has also established a new and unconstrained relationship to facts" (Vogl, *Capitalism and Ressentiment*, p. 129).

81 Ibid., p. 88.

82 See in particular Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy and Our Health, and How We Must Adapt* (New York: Currency, 2020), which provides ample empirical research.

83 See e.g. Andrea McDonnell and Adam Silver, eds., *A Gossip Politic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

84 *Don't Look Up* (dir. Adam McKay, 2021), a film with a star cast (Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, Mark Rylance, Meryl Streep, Cate Blanchett, Timothée Chalamet, etc.).

85 With variations: "In one simple slogan, the logic governing our contemporary world could be expressed as follows: conspiracy theory without conspiracy. Or perhaps: conspiracy theory without theory" (Alenka Zupančič, "Conspiracy Theory without Theory: On *Don't Look Up*," e-flux Notes, December 2022, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/509069/conspiracy-theory-without-theory-on-don-t-look-up). Another quotation from the same source: "[T]he elites need conspiracy theorists precisely in order to point their finger at them, to contrast the conspiracists' craziness with their own supposed rationality, and thus make us blind to

their madness." See also Alenka Zupančič, "A Short Essay on Conspiracy Theories," in *Objective Fictions*, edited by Adrian Johnston, Boštjan Nedoh, and Alenka Zupančič (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 232–249.

86 Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment*, pp. 130, 132.

"In the *Aeneid*, the head of Rumor is described as 'hidden in a cloud.' That is, Rumor, 'the swiftest of all evils,' is represented as unattributable to a specific source. This truly fascinating book carefully demonstrates the ways in which capitalism and its attendant technologies have functioned to literalize and thus degrade Virgil's compelling trope. A real–unreal place where transactions occur, the cloud now participates in what Dolar diagnoses as a 'general rumorization of society.'"

Joan Copjec, Brown University

Where does the strange power of rumors come from? Everyone knows that rumors are unfounded and based on thin air, but still they pass them on: rumors spread, and what appeared as a small breeze can grow into a mighty whirlwind and produce serious effects, ruin people's lives, and change the course of events. This book scrutinizes the mysterious power of rumors and seeks to analyze it philosophically, examining along the way some key moments in our cultural history – from Socrates, Shakespeare, and Cervantes to Gogol and Kafka. It also underlines the fact that, although the spreading of rumors is as old as humankind, the advent of the Internet and social media has raised this phenomenon to an entirely new level, so much so that we could speak of the rumorization of the social. The more communication there is, the more the social fabric threatens to fall apart – and the more urgent it becomes to find strategies to counteract this tendency.

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